

CONNIE MORGAN HITS THE TRAIL

James B. Hendryx

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On this stretch of trail, in a whirling blizzard, a false step would mean death for Connie.

THE WINDMILL BOOKS

CONNIE MORGAN HITS THE TRAIL

BY
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DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.
GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK
1929



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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.
FIRST EDITION

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CONNIE MORGAN
HITS THE TRAIL

CHAPTER ONE

Back in Alaska

THE sled drawn by the twelve Malemutes slipped swiftly and smoothly over the well-worn trail. Cloud banks, threatening storm, massed beyond the high-flung peaks to the northeastward, and a premonition of storm was in the roar of the wind that had sprung up with the sunrise. On the sled Connie Morgan eyed the clouds and urged the dogs to greater effort. "If that storm breaks before I make the divide, I'll never reach Ten Bow this day!" he muttered, and turned his face from the sting of the flinty snow particles that the wind picked up and hurled across the trail.

The boy's pulse bounded to the feel of the pull as the dogs sped on. He breathed deeply of the keen air, and exulted in the roar of the wind and in the menace of the fast mounting clouds.

Back in Alaska!

Through sheer joy of living he would love to buck that oncoming storm, but he must get to Ten Bow—must reach Ten Bow at the earliest

possible moment. For the thousandth time he pondered the import of that folded square of yellow paper that reposed in his pocket. It was a telegram from Waseche Bill, his partner, who had stayed in the big white country and managed their mining venture, which had grown in a few short years from a hand windlass outfit to an enterprise of enormous proportions.

Save for one short visit, he himself had not set foot in Alaska for two whole years. Cattle in Montana, timber in Michigan—experiences of interest and of profit, both. But they had kept him away from Alaska, and from Waseche Bill. And now Waseche needed him—and if his luck held, he would be in Ten Bow that very afternoon!

But why did Waseche need him? Why hadn't he wired more than that single word "Come"?

Connie pictured Waseche lying sick in the little cabin on Ten Bow—injured—dying, maybe, in the little hospital they had established on the outskirts of the camp. The very brevity of the message emphasized its urgency. Waseche Bill needed him—and many days had elapsed since that square of yellow paper had been thrust into his hand by the engineer of his logging train in the little office on the timber track near Pine Tree, Michigan.

And Connie had wasted no time. Within fifteen minutes of his receipt of the message he had turned the operation over to MacLaren, the forester, had jammed a few necessary articles into his bag, cut off the engine from the log train, and ordered the T. G. & A. cleared of traffic to the M. C. junction. Then the engineer opened his throttle and made a record run that had allowed Connie just time to catch the train for Grand Rapids. At Seattle he had just made the boat for Skagway, and at White Horse he had caught the Dawson stage. At Dawson he had bought the best dogs he could find, outfitted with an eye to ounces, and hit the long trail for Ten Bow, changing dogs at every roadhouse where fresh dogs were obtainable. And now he was on the last lap of his long journey, racing the oncoming storm for the divide that would let him into the valley of the Ten Bow.

So Connie Morgan watched his dogs, and he watched the impending storm. Five miles more would put him at the summit of the divide—but it was a tough five miles. As the ascent steepened, he grasped the tail rope and, slipping from the sled, ran behind. The run became a walk. The storm clouds blotted out the mountain peaks and bore down upon him with an increasing roar of wind. Fine particles stung his face—not

drift particles, but snow from the onrushing clouds.

The boy knew every inch of the trail, and he knew that danger lay in the last half mile to the summit—a half mile where the narrow trail had been blasted into the sheer rock wall of a mountain shoulder.

And he knew of the little shelter cabin that had been built and kept stocked with fuel and provisions and blankets on a small plateau just where the blasted trail began, to meet just such an emergency as this.

On this stretch of trail, in a whirling blizzard, with night coming on, a false step would be easy—and a false step would mean death on the rock fragments a thousand feet below.

The smother of whirling flakes increased with the darkness and Connie stepped ahead of his dogs. A half hour later he paused at the little plateau, eyed the cabin for a moment, and leashing his lead dog, struck out onto the narrow rock ledge. Waseche Bill had said, "Come."

Step by step, hugging the rock wall, Connie felt his way along the narrow, irregular trail. Behind him crept the dogs, pulling the light sled, the leashed leader close at his heels. The towering rock cliff sheltered him from the direct force of the wind, but the powdery snow, fine as flour,

edded and swirled about him, lending to the dying twilight the opaqueness of black dark.

And, as he pushed on, foot by foot, he thought of another trail—and of big Sam Morgan, his father, who had held the regard and the love of all the real sourdoughs in the days of the big stampede. For it was the trail that had got Sam Morgan——

“But not a trail like this!” cried the boy, aloud, so that the lead dog pulled forward and nuzzled his leg. “Back, boy! Don’t trip me!—no, not a trail like this,” he repeated. “My dad would have pushed through on this trail. He was a man! It was a nice smooth trail that got him—a little piece of loose ice where he wasn’t looking for it. But on this trail, on a night like this, he’d have been looking for—anything. He would have got through—and I’ll get through! Waseche needs me, and if I’d camped—to-morrow might be too late.”

It took the boy an hour to reach the summit of the divide, a “saddle” in the hills to which the trail had been blasted to cut nearly forty miles from the old trail to Ten Bow. At last he stood on the summit, and leaned against the snow-laden wind that roared through the “saddle” with the force of a full gale. Removing his mitten, he glanced at his watch; it was a quarter

to four, and way down below him, ten miles from the top of the divide, lay the camp of Ten Bow—his camp, and Waseche's! From here on the trail would be good. The sweep of the wind would prevent drifting, except in one or two places, and the footing was hard, with a downhill pull all the way.

Stringing his team out, Connie called to his dogs, and as they sprang down the trail, he threw himself upon the sled and, braking at the steeper pitches, shot downward toward Ten Bow.

CHAPTER TWO

Busted

ON A certain day, nearly three weeks before Connie Morgan topped the Ten Bow divide—to be exact, upon the first day of December, the general manager of the West Coast Supply Company in San Francisco sat behind his flat-topped desk, and leisurely opened a telegram. A single word met his eye, but that single word was enough to bring him upright in his chair, and start his fingers pushing at a battery of buttons ranged along the under side of the flat-topped desk. As he waited for response to his button-pushing, he stared at the yellow paper that lay spread out before him. It was dated December 1, and had been sent from Ten Bow, Alaska. It said briefly:

BUSTED.

ANTRIM & MORGAN

A girl appeared.

“Rush this wire!” growled the manager. “To Antrim & Morgan, Ten Bow, Alaska.” He thrust

toward her a sheet of paper on which he had dashed fiercely:

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

WEST COAST SUPPLY COMPANY

Another girl appeared.

"Bring me the correspondence for the past three months with Antrim & Morgan, Ten Bow, Alaska," he demanded, and when the sheaf of papers was laid before him, he dismissed the girl, and began to pore over the documents.

Just before closing time that evening another telegram from Ten Bow, Alaska, was laid upon his desk.

JEST WHAT I SAID.

ANTRIM & MORGAN

The manager's verbal reaction to this second telegram is unrecorded. That very evening, however, after much frantic telephoning, three men boarded the train for Seattle, where they immediately embarked for Skagway, and eventually arrived at Dawson. From that place, after two days of preparation, a caravan of sorts pulled out on the Ten Bow trail. The sourdoughs who watched the departure of the five big dog teams, with their five musher guides and three

passengers, called the caravan a "dude outfit"—and speculated as to what was taking the "dudes" to Ten Bow in the winter.

After a journey of easy stages the outfit arrived at Ten Bow where the imperturbable Waseche Bill greeted them with unruffled composure. The general manager of the West Coast Supply Company introduced himself and then, in turn, introduced the company's president, and its attorney.

"Big plant you've got here," said Van Norman, the president, as his eyes appraised the network of sluices and flumes and buildings.

"Yeh—too much of a plant fo' the workin's we've got left," answered Waseche dryly.

"But," cut in the general manager, "how about that new purchase? The enormous credit we were led to extend to you was based upon the fact that you had concluded the purchase of another valley. It was this fact, together with the sworn reports of the test drillings in this new valley, that decided us. We knew, of course, that you were about through here."

"We can talk bettah inside," suggested Waseche, and turned toward a foot bridge that led across the creek to a small log building upon the opposite side.

"Isn't this your office building?" Van Norman

asked, pointing to the big frame building near by.

"Not mine," replied Waseche. "The floor's too slick, an' the desks are too shiny. When I want to think, I got to git my back tilted agin a log wall. An' I want a desk I ain't afraid I'll scratch up with my boot heels. An' when I want to smoke my pipe, I don't want no young woman stenographer snuffin' the air like someone had kicked a skunk. No, that there office belongs to the engineers, an' the draftsmen, an' the stenographers, an' the assayers, an' the clerks. My office is ovah heah, an' it's het with a wood stove, an' not steam pipes, an' I got a he stenographer, an' his pipe stinks as bad as mine does, an' he plays a good game of cribbage. Roarin' Mike O'Reilly his name is. It wasn't that when he first come here—I give him a he-man's name, an' he's lived up to it."

Grinning, the men followed across the foot bridge, and entered the office where Waseche dismissed a young man with the injunction to slip out and knock over a mess of ptarmigan for supper.

"Now, Mr. Antrim, about this new purchase——"

"Hold on a minute! Guess I'll jest wire my pa'dner. He'd ought to be in on this." Stepping

to the door, Waseche Bill called to the retreating stenographer: "Hey! Send this wire! To Connie Mo'gan, Pine Tree, Michigan. 'Come.' An' sign my name to it."

As he turned into the room and closed the door, Van Norman stared at him aghast. "But, Mr. Antrim! It will be three weeks before he can reach here!"

"Might be—but it won't. That'll fetch him quick."

"But from Michigan!"

"Couple of weeks'll get him here. He'll start quick, an' come a-whoopin'."

"But surely you can't expect us to remain here for even two weeks! Our time is valuable."

Waseche Bill filled and lighted his pipe. "I don't expect nothin', one way or anothah. Yo'-all kin suit yo'self Yo' welcome to stay, or go any time yo' like."

The general manager bristled. "Look here, Antrim. Don't think for a minute you can play fast and loose with us. Don't you know that we can tie you up so tight you can't turn a wheel? We're the ones who are in a position to dictate—not you!"

"Sho', now. That's too bad. I didn't know yo' wanted to do no dictatin', and I let my stenographer go. I kin ketch him at the office, mebbe."

He reached for the telephone, but was interrupted by the other:

"No, no, I meant dictate terms. We want to get this tangle straightened out in a way that will serve the best interests of everyone," the manager added more pacifically.

"That's why I want my pa'dner here. He's in on it, too. Fah's I kin see, 'tain't goin' to be no trouble to straighten things out. We're busted—jest as I wired yo'. Yo'-all kin take ovah everything here, an' I'll turn ovah to yo' every dollar I've put by—but, even at that, yo' stand to lose a heap of money. I'm sorry, 'cause I got yo'-all into this. I aim to do the best I kin do—an' that's all there is to it."

Van Norman interrupted. "Understand, Mr. Antrim, that none of us for an instant doubts your integrity. You have dealt with us for a long time, and we assured ourselves long ago of your standing. But we don't quite understand the reason for this failure. According to the reports, this new valley is almost, if not quite, as rich as Ten Bow. We also understand that the purchase of it has been consummated by you—in fact, that the reason for the extraordinarily large credit asked and granted was to release the actual cash to conclude the purchase."

"That's right," answered Waseche. "The Big

Buck Valley is as good as Ten Bow—mebbe not quite so rich, but enough biggah so it would amount to mo' in the long run. The gold is there an' we own it, an' we've got the machinery to take it out with—but it won't nevah be taken out!"

CHAPTER THREE

Waseche Bill Explains

SILENCE greeted the announcement—a silence broken, at length, by Van Norman. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that fo’ the past three months Big Buck Crick has been dry as a bone. An’ when I bought that valley last summah the Big Buck run a stream half agin as big as the Ten Bow.”

“But what happened? How did it come to go dry? Maybe the solution lies in reservoirs near the head waters.”

Waseche Bill shook his head. “The’ ain’t no head watahs. Early in Septembah the’ was an earthquake—dozen or so of ’em befo’ it quit. Didn’t appeah to be nothin’ impo’tant. Jest rattled loose stuff around a little, an’ no one but women paid no ’tention to it till one mawnin’, couple days aftah the last shock, a fellah comes ovah here an’ says how Big Buck’s gone dry. Me an’ my two minin’ engineers went ovah there an’ found it was true. Big Buck used to come right out of the side of a mountain close to the bottom,

an' when we'd followed up to where it come out, the' wasn't no watah comin'. The' was only a dampish hole.

"I set the engineers to work on it, an' they spent six weeks figgerin', an' borin', an' then they recommended we should call in a geologist. So I sent outside an' got two of 'em, an' they come up an' spent about fo' weeks proddin' around, an' figgerin', an' then they tu'ned in their repawts. The' here, if yo' want to look 'em ovah. I read 'em clean through, but all the good it done was to tell me what I know'd already—that Big Buck was dry. Also, they claimed she'd stay dry—an', so fah, they ah right. Of co'se, they said anothah earthquake might staht her agin—but when a man's business depends on a earthquake comin' along an' ondoin' a job anothah earthquake done, you might's well say he's busted. So that's what I wired yo'."

"Tough luck!" exclaimed Van Norman. "Toughest break I ever heard of."

"Yeh, it's a tough break," admitted Waseche. "Of co'se, a man cain't expect to play in luck all the time, and I'm not expectin' to. But, jest the same, it's tough to go broke on othah people's money."

The lawyer cleared his throat and went into action. "What do you consider this Big Buck

valley worth, in its present condition?" he asked.

"Not a dollah. Yo' can't operate the way that stuff has got to be handled without watah, an' plenty of it."

"What do you consider your Ten Bow outfit worth, as it stands?"

"Less than nothin'. We're operatin' right now at a loss. Yo' see, we're jest cleanin' up the last of the stuff. We aimed to move the outfit ovah onto Big Buck in the spring, an' we're jest keepin' on here to hold our people togethah. We'd have saved money by shuttin' down six weeks ago—but it wouldn't be right to these folks that's stood by us when we was makin' money to turn 'em off without pay this wintah."

"You spoke of turning over your personal assets. Could you give us an idea of the amount we would realize on them?"

It was the lawyer who put the question, but Van Norman's eyes were searching Waseche Bill's face as the miner answered:

"No, I ain't nevah figgered it up."

"Will they be sufficient to liquidate our claim?"

"No—at the most, not mo' than half, if that." Waseche's voice was regretful, but he was wasting no words.

The lawyer evidently felt that regretful words

would be in order. He cleared his throat again with a nasty rasp. "Look here, Antrim, it seems to me you're taking this thing entirely too cool. A man doesn't take the wiping out of a million-dollar business as he would the loss of a penny-ante jack pot—and that's just what you are doing."

"Well," drawled Waseche Bill, "if yo' don't believe she's wiped out, yo' jest bettah take her ovah, an' try to show a profit."

"Oh, I have no doubt that the business is wiped out. I referred to the matter of the private assets. You have offered us no schedule of them—not even an estimate. We don't know where, nor what shape they are in. How do we know that you won't turn over to us just whatever you want to turn over—and still retain enough to keep you in luxury for the rest of your life?" As the lawyer paused, his thin mouth curled in a sneering smile that had all the effect of an insulting challenge.

Slowly Waseche Bill rose from his chair and walked over to the door which he opened. Then he turned squarely and faced the lawyer, who continued to smile insolently. "Put on yo' cap, an' yo' ovahcoat, an' git out of heah," he said, and the other three men saw that the blue-gray eyes gleamed like ice.

The man addressed did not move. "I have the right to be here," he answered truculently. "I am employed by these gentlemen as their legal adviser, and whether you like it or not, I shall remain to look after their interests.' His eyes had narrowed, and his whole manner was as insulting as his thin-lipped smile.

Waseche Bill did not appear to move swiftly or hurriedly. Yet in less than a minute the lawyer's chair was empty, and the lawyer himself was being projected through the door in the immediate forefront of Waseche Bill. The next moment there was the sound of a heavy pac driven against one of the broader parts of a human anatomy, a further sound as of one rolling swiftly down a steep bank, and then a loud splash, and a series of gurgling yells, as the lawyer clambered out upon the other side of the Ten Bow rapids. Then Waseche was talking again. "The hotel is down yondah. Every time yo' set foot on any Antrim & Morgan property from now on yo' kin expect to be throw'd in the crick. We-all kin settle this here mattah between us without no legal advice from no skunks!"

"This is an outrage! I'll have you arrested!" howled the shivering man.

"Yeh? Well, the hotel keepah, he's the marshal. Go tell yo' troubles to him." And Waseche Bill turned around and entered the cabin again.

"Wilkes is a fool!" growled the general manager.

Van Norman was chuckling grimly. He turned to Waseche Bill. "I hope you won't hold that fool speech against us, Antrim."

"Ce'tainly not, sah. But I'll have nothin' mo' to do with him—except to kick him in the crick if he shows up agin. We kin do all the' is to be done. I've got a lawyah here, an' a good one—one that'll look aftah yo' interests an' ours, too."

"Very good. I think we'll just send Wilkes home. His usefulness to the West Coast Supply Company has terminated. We can't afford to have a man in any responsible position who would be guilty of his unpleasant manners and uncalled-for remarks." Van Norman, frowning a little, gazed out the window. "Too bad a big plant like this has to be abandoned. I don't suppose there's any salvage in it—any way to realize any money on it?"

Waseche Bill shook his head. "No. We're almost two hundred mile back from the rivah. An' freightin' comes high. Big Buck is only ten mile from heah, an' we built a good road acrost

last summah, an' we could have moved the whole works acrost cheap an' set it up on Big Buck—but the way it stands now, I don't believe the's one cent salvage fo' every hund'ed dollahs of investment."

"No possibility of getting squared away without your partner?" asked the general manager. "So we could get back home by Christmas? You see, I've got three kiddies, and we make a good deal of Christmas."

"No, sah," answered Waseche. "I am right sorry—but it's right impo'tant that we should wait. I think yo'-all will realize that. Meantime, we kin hunt, an' play ca'ds, an' kill time the best we kin while my lawyah gits busy an' digs up them personal assets of mine that yo' friend was afraid I was goin' to hold out on yo'."

"Fool!" growled the general manager.

"Yes, sah, I think yo'-all would do right by gittin' red of him. I've noticed that a man that's so quick to look fo' crookedness in othahs, gen'ally will stand watchin' hisself. I'll walk down with yo' to the hotel, an' see that yo'-all git well took care of. Yo' see Dutch Henry, tha runs the hotel, him an' I has be'n mighty good friends fo' goin' on twenty yeahs, an' I'm 'fraid, mebbe, yo' friend may have made Dutch think yo're all of a kind, an' he might treat yo' acco'din'."

That Waseche's surmise was well grounded was evident the moment the three entered the door of the little hotel. Dutch Henry stood behind his desk and regarded with fishy eyes the man who stood hugging the roaring stove while little rills of water trickled from his clothing and formed pools on the wooden floor. At sight of Waseche, the man, his voice shaking with rage, renewed his demand upon the marshal.

"There he is, now! Arrest him, I say! I charge him with assault and battery! I demand that as a public officer you do your duty!"

Dutch Henry's eyes traveled to Waseche Bill's face, and he grinned broadly. "Hey, Vaseche, de vet von, dere, he vant me I should arrest you for you make assault mit batteries on him an' t'row him in de crick. Vat you do such t'ings like dat for, an' dondt let me see de fun? I tell him vere his warrant iss? An' he aindt got no warrant. I tell him he should go by Fairbanks und git a warrant——"

"Fairbanks!" cried the outraged attorney, appealing to his two erstwhile employers. "He says it would take a week to make the trip, if I had good luck!"

"Yaw, you might make it in a week. Den if you kin find it any chudge dat vill gif you a var-

rant you come back an' I von't serve it—I qvit first."

"He won't even give me a room!" complained the lawyer. "He says his hotel is full!"

"You'll be taken care of now," Van Norman told him curtly. "I'm enough of a judge of human nature to be sure of that." And his glance went to Waseche Bill.

But Waseche Bill didn't answer it. "These two men are friends of mine, Dutch," he said, with a nod toward Van Norman and the general manager. "See that they get the best you've got. They'll be here a couple of weeks or so. By the way, did Roarin' Mike O'Reilly leave any ptarmigan here?"

"Ya. He shtop little vile ago und leave ten bird. He say you vant dem for supper. Adolph haf dem ready py six o'clock yet."

"How about some mountain beef to go with 'em? The three of us here will have supper together."

Dutch Henry smiled upon the two men. "I fix you up mit goot rooms—small, but got goot bed unt blenty warm blanket. But you git blenty to eat, aindt it, Vaseche?"

"Reckon they won't have to worry," admitted Waseche, and turned toward the door. Midway of the floor he stopped, and with a grin and a

jerk of his thumb, indicated the man by the stove. "Better let him have a room so he can get out of those wet clothes. I reckon he'll be hittin' the back trail to-morrow—him an' Ten Bow don't seem to hitch."

Promptly at six o'clock Waseche Bill returned to the hotel and the three sat down to a veritable feast of roast ptarmigan, a joint of caribou venison done to a juicy turn, baked potatoes, and an assortment of canned vegetables. During the course of the meal, the general manager addressed the president. "There are compensations even for being compelled to remain away from home over Christmas," he smiled over his venison.

Van Norman nodded. "Do you know, I believe the vacation will do us good. But it's going to take a lot of exercise if we're going to handle meals like this every day."

Waseche Bill grinned: "The's lots of it here. Alaska's plumb full of exercise. It's the thing we've got the most of. You won't see many fat men in Alaska."

"It's too darn bad," reiterated Van Norman toward the close of the meal, "that your luck had to break like this! And I'm not thinking of the loss we will sustain on account of it, either. The loss, of course, will hit us hard, but we'll

weather it, somehow. But it'll wipe you out—and that's too bad! You're absolutely sure it's a total loss?"

Waseche Bill was filling his pipe. "Yes, sah. That is, I'm as ce'tain of it as a man kin be. Of co'se, it ain't plumb onpossible that anothah quake might come along an' onquake what the last quake quoke—but it's mighty onprobable." Then shifting from the philosophic business man to the thoughtful host: "Suah yo've had enough suppah to sleep on, sah?"

"I've had too much to sleep on," chuckled Van Norman, "but I'm happy." As he nodded back at Waseche, there was genuine content in his eyes. Content and something more—admiration.

CHAPTER FOUR

Connie Arrives at Ten Bow

CONNIE MORGAN'S twelve big Malemutes fairly flew down the wind-whipped trail that slanted into the valley of the Ten Bow. Almost before the boy realized it, a blur of light showed through the smother of driving snow, and a moment later he halted the dogs before the big building that housed the general offices of Antrim & Morgan. Leaping from his sled, he paused an instant to glance in the direction of the little cabin which he and Waseche Bill had rolled up with their own hands and which had been *home* to both of them ever since the early days of their partnership. But no faintest glow of light showed through the storm, and his eyes wandered to that other cabin across the creek, the one that Waseche Bill insisted upon using as an office. A faint glow caught his eye. His heart leaped. Maybe Waseche Bill was all right! Then, the thought faded; of course there would be a light—Waseche's stenographer would be there. Well, Roaring Mike O'Reilly could tell him about Waseche.

A man stepped around the corner of the building and, turning the dogs over to him, the boy hurried across the foot bridge and ascended the bank to the little log cabin upon the opposite side of the creek.

Inside the cabin, Van Norman glanced at his watch and lighted a fresh cigar. "Only five o'clock," he said, "and black as midnight outside. So this is a regular Alaska blizzard? I have heard of 'em, but never thought I would see one. How long do they last?"

"Yo' cain't nevah tell," answered Waseche Bill. "Sometimes only a little while, an' then again I've seen 'em last fo' days."

"This will close all the trails, won't it?" asked the general manager. "Probably delay that partner of yours a week or more."

"No, not hardly a week. He ain't hardly due fo' two or three days yet, even if he had good luck. An' by that time the trail will be good enough fo' him. He's mighty skookum when it comes to trailin'. Trails that would stop most folks don't even make him hesitate. Of co'se, take it now, in a sto'm like this, that last half mile to the divide would stop anyone——"

"What's that?" demanded a new voice.

All eyes turned to the doorway, where a muffled snow-white figure stood framed by the

smother of whirling snow-powder that eddied about him.

Waseche Bill was on his feet even before the door slammed behind the apparition. The white figure catapulted itself full upon him. "What's the matter, Waseche? I'm here! Are you sick?" A pair of keen eyes gleamed questioningly upon the two other occupants of the room.

"Law, no! Son, of co'se I ain't sick! Whatevah made yo' think that? But look here, yo'—when did yo' cross the divide?"

"A while back—an hour and a half, maybe."

"In the dark! In a sto'm like this!" Waseche Bill's hands clutched at the boy's shoulders. "Yo' gone plumb crazy? Why didn't yo' camp at the cabin?"

"Camp at the cabin! And lose a whole day—when I knew you needed me! What do you take me for?" As the boy spoke, he began to remove his outer garments.

"If anything had happened to yo'—out there on the trail, I'd of nevah fo'give myself——"

"Oh, rats! Nothing did happen, and I'm here—so that's that. What in thunder did you want me for, if you're not——"

"We're busted, son—plumb wiped out an' busted."

The ice-encrusted muffler dropped with a

thud, and there was just a hint of reproach in the eyes that met the gaze of Waseche Bill. "Is that all! Gosh, I thought you were sick!"

The general manager of the West Coast Supply Company cleared his throat, his eyes on the face of the boy. "You don't mean, Antrim, that this is your partner—this—this kid!"

Waseche Bill grinned as his fingers fumbled at the frozen neck-latch of Connie's parka. "Yeh," he answered. "This is him. I done told yo'-all he was right skookum when it come to trailin'."

"But," exclaimed Van Norman, "he's just a boy!"

"Yeh, that's what the calendar says," admitted Waseche Bill dryly. "But, if yo'-all don't believe he's plumb able, that-a-way, jest yo' hitch up yo' dawgs an' try to go some place on that trail he jest come ovah."

Both men glanced at the window that showed only a square of opaque night and involuntarily both shuddered. Waseche turned to Connie.

"These men is up from Frisco to kind of straighten things out. We owe 'em a heap of money. This is Mistah Van No'man, president of the West Coast Supply Company, an' the othah is Mistah Eccles, the general manager."

Connie shook the hand of each. "Glad to

meet you," he said. "Hope we can fix it so you won't lose anything. If you'll clear out, now, and let Waseche and me have a powwow, we'll get together later."

As the two arose and drew on their overcoats, Van Norman smiled. "I'm beginning to see what your partner meant when he said you are 'plumb able.' After what you've just been through, most men would be content to call it a day."

"Oh, I'm not a bit tired," answered the boy. "I had good dogs, you see, and a riding trail most of the way."

"See yo'-all at suppah," said Waseche Bill. "We'll be down to the hotel around six o'clock."

When they were alone in the office, Connie glanced inquiringly at his partner. "What do you mean, we'll see them at the hotel for supper? You haven't abandoned our little cabin, have you?"

Waseche Bill smiled. "Yo' know dawg-gone well I ain't abandoned the cabin, son. But Dutch Henry's got holt of an awful good cook, an' I be'n eatin' down to the hotel this wintah. Saves time, too."

Connie nodded gravely. "I suppose you and Roaring Mike O'Reilly get in, anyway, two more games of cribbage a day that way. Well, let's

go over to the cabin. I'm homesick to see it. We can talk better over there, anyway. Most of the things we've done have been talked over in that little cabin."

Waseche Bill turned abruptly away and reached for his cap and coat, which hung from a wooden peg driven into the wall. "Yes, son," he answered softly. "It's there, yo' might say, me an' yo' stahted in—an' it's fittin', I reckon, that it's there we should finish."

"What do you mean—finish?" cried the boy, so sharply that Waseche Bill dropped his cap. "We may be broke, but we're not finished—you can bet your bottom dollar on that! What you mean is that we started once in that cabin—and we'll start there again! Come on—let's go!"

CHAPTER FIVE

In the Cabin

OVER in the little cabin Waseche Bill lighted the lamp and replenished the fire in the stove. Then he filled his pipe and, seating himself in a chair, tilted back against the wall and rested his heels on the woodbox. Connie stretched out on the bunk and listened while his big partner explained the situation in detail.

"So, yo' see, son," Waseche concluded, "the whole outfit here ain't wo'th the powdah to blow it up with. In a way, it's my fault fo' goin' ahead an' buyin' up the Big Buck valley an', bein as this heah West Coast Supply Company give us all that credit on my say-so, I'm goin' to turn ovah all my own prope'ty to 'em to make good. It won't meet the bill by about half——"

"How about the cattle ranch, and the timber?" asked the boy. "Have you figured them in?"

"No, I ain't figgered them in--an' I ain't goin' to. Them's yo'n. Yo' see, son, with them two prope'ties down in the States, that-a-way, I done had all the papahs made out in yo' name

so's yo' could go ahead an' run 'em without pesterin' me with it, an' makin' a lot of delay sendin' papahs back an' fo'th. With them prope'ties, yo' ought to do right well or, if yo' sold 'em out, yo'd have enough so's yo' wouldn't have to worry none."

"What is this property of your own that you're going to turn over?" asked the boy.

"Why, mostly, it's stock in this here Chena Development. Yo' see, it looked pretty good when I bought it, an' then it got so it looked pretty shaky; so I had the bookkeeper take it off the pardnership books an' charge it up agin' me, personal. But, lately, she's picked up again—an' it's wo'th mo' now than when I bought it."

"I see," said Connie, turning his face to conceal a grin. "And the ranch and the timber—are they carried on the books as partnership property?"

"Well—no. Yo' see—they was, at first, but when they begun to pay, I told the bookkeeper to charge 'em off to yo'—to kind of offset that Chena stuff of mine."

Connie sat up in the bunk and swung his legs to the floor. "So if we threw in the whole bunch—Chena stock, ranch, and timber—we could square up our debts and come out even? Is that it?"

"Yes—but I ain't goin' to see yo' busted through no mistake of mine. It don't make no diff'ence about me. I got along befo' I staked Ten Bow—an' I'll get along again. But yo' different. Yo' got a long time to live yet, an' yo've wo'ked hard buildin' them prope'ties an. yo' entitled to 'em an'——"

"You make me tired! You talk like you're an old man——"

"I'm mo'n fo'ty——"

"Forty! What's forty! You're as good a man as you ever were! And I'm a whole lot better than I was when I beat out the Ten Bow stam-pede with those three old dogs! What do we care whether we're busted or not? What did all our money ever get us? We couldn't eat any more or any better grub, could we? We couldn't wear any more clothes, or any better ones! And you know just as well as I do that after this outfit got to paying us big money, we both of us lost interest in it! I tell you, Waseche, we were both happier back in the days we were cranking our own windlass than we've ever been since. I'm glad we're busted—so we can go ahead and make another strike. We've got something ahead of us now! We've got something to do!"

Waseche Bill shook his head. "Yo' fo'gettin', son, that it ain't like it used to be. The' ain't

no mo' po' man's gold in Alaska. The placers is all played out, an'——"

"Who says there isn't any more poor man's gold?" cried the boy defiantly. "And who says the placers have all played out? That's what they were saying when you struck pay on Ten Bow!"

"Yeh, but it worn't so, then—we proved it——"

"And I don't believe it's so now! And we'll prove that, too—or, you bet, we'll have a run for our money! That's a lazy man's howl. Just because some men have not found gold where they've prospected for it isn't any sign there isn't a lot of it where they haven't prospected!"

"Yeh, but I don't know where they haven't prospected. Seems like——"

"Neither do I know—but we will know! And you bet we'll find gold, too."

"But yo' don't have to. Yo've got a couple of good payin' businesses now. Yo' don't have to go kihootin' off on no prospectin' trips."

Connie grinned. "I suppose you don't know that a partner is personally liable for the partnership debts. This partnership is busted, and both you and I are legally liable to the extent of all our personal property for the debts of the concern."

Waseche nodded. "Yeh, I know that, son—but, yo' see, we ain't no pardnership no mo'."

"Not a partnership! What do you mean?"

"It's this-a-way. 'Long a couple of yeahs ago when yo' an' that Injun 'Merican Joe was ramp-sin' 'round the country ovah east of the Mackenzie, I figgered how it would be bettah if we was a co'poration, instead of a pardnership; so I went to wo'k an' had us made into a co'poration. Yo' an' me owns all the stock except fo' shares, which I made ovah to Cain, an' Roarin' Mike O'Reilly, so we could have fo' officers, like the law says. Yeh, we're a co'poration, son. I'm president, yo', vice president, Mike's treasurer, an' Cain's secretary. An' I s'pose yo' don't know that stockholdahs in a co'poration ain't liable fo' only the amount of stock they've got. So, yo' see, we ain't neithah one of us liable fo' ouah personal prope'ty. I'm puttin' in mine, 'cause I claim it ain't no mo'n right. They relied on me—an' besides, I made the deal that busted us."

Connie was on his feet, now, facing his partner. "Look here, Waseche, do you think for a minute I'd sit back and see you busted, and not bust with you? I don't care a darn whether I'm legally liable or not—do you think I would sit back and see those men lose money because they

trusted to make good on our obligations without putting in every cent I can get my hands on to square up? Didn't you know dog-gone well I'd put in every dollar I had——”

The match Waseche Bill had been holding to his pipe bowl between cupped palms burned his fingers, and he dropped it so hurriedly that Connie caught the grin the hands were supposed to hide. The next instant two strong hands were on Waseche's shoulders, and then he found himself flat on his back on the bunk, with the smell of burning wool in his nostrils as the sparks from his pipe burned into the blanket.

As the two beat out the sparks, Waseche Bill's grin broadened. “Sho', son, I know'd what yo'd say—I was jest givin' yo' a chanct to say it—that's all. Come on, le's wash up, and go down to the hotel. Dutch Henry he's got a cook which he cooks summah's on a steamboat. Dutch, he's heard by this time that yo' back, an' I'm bettin' he's got that cook to wo'k on somethin' special!”

CHAPTER SIX

Connie Makes a Deal

THE greeting Connie Morgan received from Dutch Henry attested the regard in which the boy was held by the men of the North, and it was altogether a merry party that seated itself at the table, heaped high with good things by the erstwhile steamboat cook. There were no other guests in the dining room and Dutch Henry, a sourdough of the early days, presided at his own table, and many were the tales told by the host and by Waseche Bill of stampede days, and of the deeds of mighty men.

It was during a lull in the conversation that Waseche's eyes fell upon a small table set for a single guest at the other side of the room. "Who's that table fo'?" he asked. "I didn't know the' was anyone else stoppin' heah."

"Ya," answered Dutch Henry. "Comes in a man a leedle vile ago. Comes py de trail from Big Buck in. I aindt like his looks werry much. I seen him some blase before. He aindt no che-

chahco or he dondt make it in dis storm mit a five-dog team, effen on de Big Buck trail. He should get a room unt git warm; so he be late for supper, yet."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a man appeared in the doorway, hesitated, and surveyed the group at the table through beady, lashless eyes. He was a little man, with a sharp, weasel face and ears that lay back flat against his head.

Dutch Henry pointed toward the other table: "Py dot table you git you supper, yet." And, in a voice that rose to a veritable bellow: "Hey, Adolph! Bring vonce in dot supper for de man vat comes mit de dogs!"

Adolph appeared, served the man, and withdrew, and Dutch Henry launched into another story, while both Connie and Waseche Bill studied the profile of the man, who was wolfing down his food. Suddenly Waseche's shoulders stiffened, and he drew in his breath as if to speak, but at that monent the heel of Connie's moccasin came down with warning pressure upon the toe of his pac.

Waseche Bill shot an inquiring glance into the boy's face and, interpreting a tiny flicker of the left eyelid, settled back in his chair and listened to the story.

The man finished his meal, and as Dutch Henry concluded his story the man pushed back his chair and approached him. "I want to see you on a matter of business," he said.

Dutch Henry met the beady gaze of the man with a frown of annoyance. "Go on away! Can't you see it, ve iss all here friends talking? Ve aindt got it no time for business."

"But this is important——"

"Vell, if it iss qvick business, go aheadt. If it aindt qvick business, it vill keep already till to-morrow."

"It's a private matter. I——"

"I am choost so brivate right here vat I am going to be. I aindt got no business vat I got to sneak around behint maybe a door unt talk about it."

Again, the man scowled and hesitated; then he asked: "Do you own this hotel?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I do."

"Vat business you got it to find oudt if I own it, oder if I dondt own it?"

"I want to buy it—that is, I want to buy the exclusive rights on Big Buck, to build on. I hear they are figuring on moving this plant over there when the break-up comes."

Dutch Henry pondered the statement. "Ya,

dot vas de talk, already," he admitted. "But you got to talk mit dem," he indicated Waseche Bill and Connie, who had been interested listeners. "Dey own de hotel. I choost run it for dem. Maybe you kin buy it de land on Big Buck to put it on, too. Dey iss de vons vat owns it all—hotel, land, unt hotel rights."

The man turned to the partners. "How about it?" he asked. "Want to sell?"

Waseche Bill was about to reply with a terse negative when Connie forestalled him. "Why, yes, we might sell—if the figure was right. What would you be willing to give?"

The man drew up an empty chair. "It's this way," he began. "I've been runnin' a hotel down on the lower river—Kaitok Landin'. Done well with it, too, until couple months ago I got wind that the camp was goin' to be abandoned, come spring. So I sold out to a chechahco that come in on the boat lookin' fer an investment. Had his wife an' two kids with him, an' plunked down twenty-five thousan' cash." The man paused and chuckled. "He'll find out he's got an investment, all right, when the hull camp up an' pulls out on him when the river opens. He'll be monarch of all he surveys, as the feller says. You don't ketch me nappin'. I wasn't born yesterday, nor yet the day before."

"Pretty good," grinned Connie. "What was his name—this chechahco?"

"Sell, Thomas G. Sell, is the name that was wrote on the deed. Come spring, he'll find he's sold, all right." And, chuckling at his own wit, the man winked elaborately.

"How'd you happen to come here?" asked Connie.

"Well, everyone knows Ten Bow's a good camp, an' when the word come down the river that the same parties had bought up Big Buck, an' was figgerin' on movin' the hull works acrost, I figgers it mightn't be a bad place fer to locate, providin' I could git exclusive hotel rights. 'Course," he hastened to add, "it won't be nothin' as good as what I had—but, if I could buy right, I might squeeze a livin' out of it."

Connie grinned. "This isn't a cheap camp," he said, "and the land over on Big Buck isn't cheap land, either. If you really want to buy it, though, we'll sell the exclusive hotel rights and an acre of ground on the main street of the new camp for thirty thousand dollars, cash. Surface rights, only—we retain all mineral rights."

The man scowled blackly. "What do you mean—thirty thousan'? Do you think I'm a fool?"

"You just got through claiming you aren't,"

answered the boy. "I'm taking your word for it. I don't know how much you know about values. But that's our price. You can take it or leave it. But the figure I gave you is for a quick sale. You've got just five minutes to make up your mind." He pulled out his watch and laid it on the table.

In vain the man stormed and raved, and begged, and implored. Connie paid no attention whatever. At length he picked up his watch. "You've got just one minute left," he said indifferently.

Thirty seconds later the man blurted out: "I'll take it! It's a hold-up! It's plain robbery—but I'll take it."

"All right," answered Connie. "And we might as well get it over with right now. You've got the cash, have you?" The man nodded, and Connie turned to his partner. "Call up that lawyer of ours, will you? And tell him to come down here and bring a blank deed, and the plat of the new camp, and some paper to write a contract on. And tell the bookkeeper or whoever's got the combination of the safe to go over to the office and bring me down that black box that's got some papers of mine in it."

Stepping to the telephone in the hotel office, Waseche Bill talked for a moment, and returned to the table. "They'll be along directly," he

announced. Then, dismissing business again for the time: "That story Dutch was tellin' puts me in mind of old Josh Cummin's an' his wife." And he rambled on into another story of old-timers.

As Waseche Bill talked, Connie watched the little rat-faced man out of the corner of his eye, and he noted that the man's brows drew into a frown, as if he were trying to remember something—as if the sound of the speaker's voice had stirred vague memories—memories that the man had much rather would remain undisturbed. And, inwardly, the boy grinned. "Waseche wore a beard those days," he thought to himself. "He doesn't remember him, or he wouldn't be sitting there."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Business Proposition

THE office door opened and two men entered, noisily stamping the snow from their feet. One of the newcomers placed a black enameled box in front of Connie, who proceeded at once to explain the nature of the transaction to the other man, who was the firm's attorney.

"So," Connie concluded, "if you'll get out the plat of the Buck Creek camp and let the man pick out the place he wants for his hotel, we'll go ahead with the deed and the contract."

The lawyer hesitated for an instant but, at a nod from Waseche Bill, he spread out the plat on the table. After asking several questions, the little rat-faced man placed his finger on a certain spot. "An acre, you said," he reminded Connie. "A hull acre."

"A whole acre—surface rights only," Connie assented, and the lawyer proceeded to draw the deed. This concluded, he drew a contract by the terms of which one H. Squigg became the owner of the exclusive hotel rights of Buck Creek

valley. Signatures were affixed, and as Squigg signed, Connie smiled, as he remembered that other time, several years before, when Squigg had affixed his signature to a certain document, in the presence of one Indian, one small boy, and a goodly number of the big, bearded men of the North.

Squigg stood up, drew a belt from beneath his clothing, and with obvious reluctance counted out thirty thousand dollars in big bills. Carefully, Connie recounted the money, separating it into two piles, one of twenty-five thousand dollars, and one of five thousand. Waseche Bill watched him with an expression of grim understanding in which there was something of disapproval.

Laying his hand on the larger of the two piles, Connie riffled the crisp edge of the notes with his thumb. "Sell—Thomas Sell, you said his name was, didn't you?"

Squigg looked up from his contract. "The party I sold out to, down river? Yeh, that was his name. Them there's the bills he give me—with five thousan' of my own throw'd in. What's he got to do with it?"

"Only this, Mr. Squigg—I think I'll just buy out his hotel down at Kaitok Landing."

"But—didn't I tell you it ain't no good! Jest

as quick as they kin git the boats in after the break-up, they're goin' to move the hull camp away. That hotel won't be worth a chaw of tobacco!"

"Well," answered Connie, staring straight into the lashless eyes, "it'll be worth just that chew of tobacco more than a hotel on Big Buck."

"What do you mean—jest that much more?" uttered the man, and his rat-like face paled perceptibly in the lamplight.

For a moment the boy did not answer. Opening the black box on the table before him, he rummaged among its contents and drew out a slip of paper. Then, feeling in his pocket, he drew forth a pencil and a square of yellow paper, Waseche Bill's telegram, and figured rapidly upon the back of it. From another pocket he produced a check book, and reaching for the pen, drew a check that he tossed across toward the watching Squigg.

"There's your change, Mr. Squigg," said the boy. "I know you'll feel better now that we're all squared up."

Mechanically Squigg raised the check from the table and examined it. "Seven hundred an' thirty-two dollars an' twenty-two cents," he read aloud. "Say, what's all this—about change—an' buyin' up that hotel—an' what do you

mean about its being worth more'n what a hotel on Big Buck's worth? You crazy, or what?"

"No, I'm not crazy, Mr. Squigg. I think you'll agree that I'm not at all crazy. If you try hard, I think you'll remember a miners' meeting that was called, about five years ago this winter. You were there—and an Indian named Pete Mateese——"

The little man had half risen from his chair and his voice shook with rage as he pointed a trembling finger at Waseche Bill. "I know'd I'd heerd that voice! I know'd it—when he was talkin'! It was him tuk my claim away an' give it to that Injun! Him, an' you, an' them others! You've grow'd sence then—an' he's shaved off his whiskers! You done me that time! But you can't do me now! I've got the deed an' the contract—all made out, an' signed, an' paid fer!"

"Yes," agreed the boy, "and you've got the change that's coming to you. And, here——" He paused and wrote the word "paid" across the face of the paper he had removed from the box. "Here's your canceled note."

"Note?"

"Yes. You remember, Mr. Squigg, that after we'd figured in the gold you stole from Pete Mateese, and the wages you owed him, and the price of those dogs of his you stole, and the

interest on the whole thing, and had taken over your claim to pay him, there was still a balance in his favor of over three thousand dollars. And you'll remember that, at Waseche's suggestion, you signed a note for the amount. The note didn't mean anything to Pete Mateese, and the others didn't think it was any good—they had run you out of camp, and were satisfied to be well rid of you. But I thought that maybe, sometime, it might come in handy; so I took it and put it with my papers. And, sure enough, I was right. You see, Mr. Squigg, that was five years ago, and I've just figured in the interest, compounded. That brings the total amount due on your note up to four thousand two hundred and sixty-seven dollars and seventy-eight cents—that goes to Pete Mateese, and you have the check for your change."

White as a sheet, the man stared uncomprehendingly into the face of the boy. "But—what do you mean? That's your money? I—paid——"

"Oh, no, it isn't," answered Connie. "If I should keep a dollar of that thirty thousand you paid me I'd be as crooked as you are! That twenty-five thousand goes back to Thomas G. Sell—because you stole it from him! And the amount of this note, with interest, goes to Pete Mateese. And you have the balance. I had in-

tended to sell you the Big Buck property you wanted and the hotel privilege for just enough to square up that note, until you happened to tell us about swindling the chechahco—after that, I figured I'd just square his account, too. You see, Ten Bow has petered out——”

“Sure, I know. That's why I figgered on git-tin' in on Big Buck!”

“Well, you're in,” answered the boy dryly. “But there isn't going to be any camp there—next spring, nor any other time. Big Buck is dry—dry as the Sahara Desert—and she's going to stay dry. Now you've got your ground, and you can go ahead and build your hotel—and I don't think anybody will bother your exclusive privilege.”

For just an instant Squigg's beady eyes swept the faces of the little group of men; then without a word he sneaked from the room, followed by the raucous guffaw of Dutch Henry, which was echoed by the laughter of the others.

When the laughter had subsided, Waseche spoke: “I done spotted him 'bout the same time yo' did, son,” he said. “An' I was jest rar'in' up to tell him to git plumb out of Ten Bow, when yo' come down on my toes, an' I helt off to see what yo' aimed to do. Yo' done justice all right, I guess.”

"But you don't quite approve, do you?" Connie's flush showed that he valued his partner's opinion.

"Well, I do an' I don't," Waseche answered, and his judicial air changed to an urgent earnestness as he went on. "It's a plumb shame to let a rat like Squigg go round robbin' honest men - yet I don't like the idee of yo' fightin' trickery with trickery."

Connie's flush deepened. "Guess that was what it was all right," he admitted, after a pause. "But, gosh, Waseche—you don't want me to go and hand the money back to that thief, do you?"

"No, I don't," Waseche acknowledged. "Things is pretty near straight as they is. Everybody's been done right by—if yo' don't mind havin' let yo' foot slip a little, son."

"Well, I do." Connie grinned wryly. "I will watch my step after this, Waseche."

The two had quite forgotten that they had listeners, but Van Norman brought them back to realization with a sudden chuckle of satisfaction.

"Young man," he told Connie, "I'll trust you to watch your step, and I've seen you use your head. If you ever want a good job, you don't have to go any further than San Francisco to find it."

Connie turned to him with appreciation. "Thank you," he said, "but I have a good job in sight. As soon as we get our affairs here cleared up, Waseche and I are going to hit out prospecting. And we're going to make a strike, too—sometime."

Van Norman reached across the table and shook the boy's hand. "I believe you will," he said. "And now, while we're all here, I wonder if we couldn't hold a sort of preliminary conference, and get started in straightening out our affairs?"

Nods of assent greeted the suggestion, and Van Norman turned to the attorney. "What would you suggest as the first step?" he asked.

The lawyer pinched his chin between thumb and forefinger. "Well, in the first place, I would suggest that you apply to the court for the appointment of a receiver."

"Where is the court?"

"At Fairbanks. That's the nearest one having authority."

Van Norman looked disappointed. "It's going to take quite a while, isn't it?"

The lawyer grinned. "Well, it may. You see these receivers get paid at a pretty good rate, and some of them aren't in any hurry to work themselves out of a job."

"Let's not bother with a receiver," exclaimed Connie. "Why can't we go ahead and do it ourselves?"

"It's got to be acco'din' to law, son," said Waseche Bill.

"Sure—if they apply for a receiver. But what's the law got to do with us—now? We're a corporation, aren't we? We can go ahead and do business, can't we? We don't owe a dollar except to these men, do we? Well, then, let's just go ahead and pay them—and then forget the corporation. If it's busted after that, whose business is it? We don't want it any more—and I'm sure no one else does. If we wind up things that way, it seems to me that nobody'll be hurt, and everybody'll be happy."

"But you must understand," argued the lawyer, "that there are no available funds and no assets on hand to liquidate this debt."

"Did yo' git through lookin' up them assets of mine?" asked Waseche.

"Yes. But, you understand, there are practically no assets of the corporation—there's practically no salvage in the whole plant. Your personal property, which, as I advised you, cannot be made liable for the debts of the corporation, unless you voluntarily make it over

to the corporation, amounts to a sum equal to about one half of the indebtedness."

"Well, then, that's all there is to it!" exclaimed Connie. "I can sell my ranch and my timber for as much as that, and I'll put that in, and everybody will be square. Then Waseche and I can go prospecting! What's the use of dragging in courts and receivers?"

Van Norman and Eccles were staring incredulously. Van Norman was the first to speak. "Do you mean that you have personal assets which, together with those of your partner, will satisfy this claim? And that you are willing to pool them for that purpose, with the perfect understanding that you are under no legal liability to do so?"

"Why, sure! We owe you the money, don't we? We're the corporation, aren't we? Well, you wouldn't expect us to keep the money when we know we owe it fair and square, would you? Right is right and wrong is wrong, no matter what the law says about it, isn't it? What do you take us for, a bunch of crooks?"

For answer Van Norman rose from his chair and passing around the table stood at Connie's side and looked down into his upturned face. "My boy," he said, "I have been in active busi-

ness for forty years. And during that time I have seen many things. But I don't believe I've ever watched a business man establish his standing any faster than you've established yours this evening. You and your partner may not have a cent, but the West Coast Supply Company stands ready to back you to the limit—and no questions asked. Eh, Eccles?"

"Right," said Eccles. "As far as I'm concerned, all they have to do is to say what they want."

"Well, now that that's all settled," laughed Connie, "let's talk about something else. We'll wait till this storm settles, and then I'll go outside with you two, and sell the ranch and the timber and then I'll come back and Waseche and I can get started. And while I'm gone," he said to Waseche, "you scuttle around and get hold of some good dogs and a good outfit. We're going to make another strike!"

"Go to it," smiled Van Norman. "But don't forget that if at any time in the future you two, or either one of you, should need any credit, or any backing, you're to call on me, and you'll get it to the limit of my ability. With the West Coast Supply Company your credit stands higher than any commercial rating that has ever been written!"

And so on the following day, but one, three dog teams pulled out of Ten Bow onto the Dawson trail. Van Norman and Eccles occupied the leading sleds, with their mushers running beside, and as Connie strung out his own team he paused to wave his cap to Waseche Bill, who stood in the door of the little cabin.

"So long, partner!" cried the boy. "I'll be back as soon as I can! Have everything ready—'cause when we mush, we're going to mush a long ways!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Farewell to Ten Bow

So CONNIE MORGAN was off, off to sell his Western ranch and his Michigan timber land that he might do his share in paying what he and Waseche Bill owed the West Coast Supply Company.

Well, anyway, he reflected, together he and Waseche could wipe out the debt. At least, even if they were broke, they were starting again with a clean slate.

Broke. That tricky earthquake! Why did it have to lift up a mountain and drop it down to dam up Big Buck Creek just as they had invested a big sum of money in getting ready to take the gold out of Big Buck valley? Well, there was nothing doing in that valley now. You couldn't operate without water, and Big Buck was only a dry creek bed now.

No use howling, Connie and Waseche had agreed. Nothing to do but start again from the bottom—gold prospecting. There was still gold left in Alaska. There was still a lot of thrill in

getting out and hunting it up, too. Connie and Waseche had grinned at each other undismayed.

"I'll go sell the ranch and the timber land and get us squared away," Connie told his partner. "You get our outfit ready."

"I'll have everything ready, son," Waseche assured him.

And Connie was off.

Moreover, he was off, quite indifferent to the fact that in the last few days he had turned the man Squigg into a bitter enemy. To Connie, Squigg was only a particularly mean North-country sharper who well deserved stern handling. Squigg had cheated Sell, the tenderfoot, out of twenty-five thousand dollars by selling him a hotel near a camp about to be deserted. Well, Connie intended to see that Sell got his money back. If Squigg didn't like it, he could lump it.

The old year slipped into the new. January passed, and half of February, before Connie Morgan returned to Alaska to join Waseche Bill in the little cabin on the bank of the Ten Bow. It was a different Ten Bow from the Ten Bow of the past three or four years. No smoke issued from the big stacks. Flumes and sluices were piled high with drifted snow, and snow lay deep against the door of the office. The rows of shacks

and cabins that had been the homes of the miners were cold and tenantless, and the long, low buildings of the works stood gaunt and deserted.

Connie halted his dogs on a terrace where the trail finally dipped down into the valley, and his eyes took in each detail of the desolate camp. One tiny blur of motion caught his eye, just a curl of gray smoke from the chimney of a little cabin, apart, and up the creek from the others. For a moment the boy's lips clamped tight and then, with his eyes on the thread of smoke, he spoke aloud: "It's too bad, but it can't be helped."

The smoke drifted toward the mountain that had shifted in the earthquake and dammed off the waters of Big Buck. Raising a mittened fist the boy shook it in defiance. "You think you've got us licked! But you haven't! We'll make a bigger strike somewhere else!"

Abruptly, he swung in ahead of the dogs and broke trail straight for the little cabin.

As he ascended the bank from the creek the door was flung open and Waseche stood framed in the doorway. "Back a'ready, son!" the welcoming voice rumbled. "Sho! I didn't expect yo' fo' a couple of weeks yet."

"You bet I'm back! And hungry as the dickens! Is it dinner time?"

Waseche grinned as he swung out to help unharness the dogs. "It's always dinnah time when a man's hungry, an' this time yo' struck it lucky. I got a whalin' big stew jest about ready to set off the stove. Shot a young moose day befo' yesterday. Yo' run along in. I'll feed the dogs."

A few minutes later the two partners were seated at the table. "Gosh, I haven't had a meal like this in a long time!" cried the boy as Waseche piled his plate high with the savory stew. "Do you know, Waseche, it's worth being busted—just to be back here in this little cabin with you, eating our own cooking!"

"It's wo'th bein' busted to heah yo' say that," drawled Waseche. "An' seein' how we both got our money's wo'th, let's get outside of this heah stew, an' sort of take inventory."

Connie grinned. "It won't take long. Gee whiz, Waseche, doesn't a fellow feel fine and free when he's busted!"

"Yo' talk like yo' was glad we're busted," laughed Waseche Bill.

"Well, why not? We're busted, but there's no use being sorry about it. We're down, but we're not out—not by a long shot! The only question is: Where do we go from here?"

Waseche Bill nodded slowly. "Yes, that's the

question. Looks like everything south an' west of the rivah has be'n prospected—an' most of the country east of it, too."

Connie smiled. "Well, take away west and east and south, and that leaves north, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but the's been quite a bit of prospectin' nawth, too."

"Sure," agreed the boy. "But there's a lot of big rivers and a thousand little ones north of the Yukon that haven't been prospected to amount to anything—I'll show you when we finish eating. I got all the latest maps, and there are thousands and thousands of square miles that haven't been explored. It stands to reason that the unknown rivers and creeks are just as likely to have gold in their beds as the ones that have panned out. The reason they haven't been prospected is that the country up there is too blamed skookum for chechahcos to tackle, and most of the sourdoughs got theirs without going so far away."

"Of co'se," announced Waseche Bill, "we could both of us get good payin' jobs an' settle down an' take it easy. Van No'man offered you one, an' I got a lettah heah from Ramsey, which he'd heard we'd busted, an' he wants me to manage the Chena outfit."

Connie Morgan never batted an eye. "You'll have to try again, Waseche," he said. "That was a poor shot. It doesn't even get a rise. Don't you suppose I know you're just itching to hit the trail?"

"You win, son!" laughed the older man. "I writ Ramsey a lettah an' sent it out by Roarin' Mike O'Reilly. I thanked him, but I done told him that I reckon me an' yo' was aimin' to hit out fo' ouahselves."

"Where has Roaring Mike gone?"

"I sent him out fo' to locate about ten good dawgs. He'll be back most any time, now I s'pose we might as well get out them maps, an' look 'em ovah. Did yo' fix it all up with them West Coast folks?"

"Yes, everything is squared up. It will be some time yet before the final settlements are made, but everybody is satisfied, and it may be that we'll have a pretty decent balance due us when the final payments are made. Meantime, we aren't quite broke—we've got enough for a grub stake, anyhow, and that's all we need."

For the next three days the partners pored over maps, arranged and rearranged a trip that would take them far north of the Yukon, and would include the exploration of rivers and creeks that the eyes of white men had never seen.

On the fourth day came Roaring Mike O'Reilly with the sled dogs, and the next two days were spent in preparation for the journey.

On the evening before their departure, after Roaring Mike had retired to the cabin Waseche had used as his office, the two partners sat alone in the little cabin that had been the only real home either had known for many a year.

"I hate to go away and leave it," said Connie, glancing affectionately about the single room. "Kind of hate to think of anyone else living in it. We've had it so long."

Waseche grinned at him. "Well, son, Ten Bow ain't likely to be ovah crowded from now on, an' we'll tell Roarin' Mike not to rent ouah cabin out to nobody. He's goin' to stay on fo' a while, you know, as a special watchman to see that nobody tries to raise ructions with the plant. I've had him made a special deputy ma'shal."

"Whew," grinned Connie. "All that! Well, he can watch the little old cabin, too, then. And to-morrow we will be on the move. We've got to stop at Kaitok and give that chechahco his twenty-five thousand dollars that Squigg beat him out of. And we've got to find Pete Mateese and give him his share. Last I heard of him he was over around Fairbanks."

"We'll go out by Fairbanks, and then hit down the Tanana to the Yukon."

Connie chuckled. "I bet that man, Sell, will be glad to get his money back."

"He'd sho' ort to be. Maybe it'll learn him to be mo' careful next time. Most chechahcos is fools till they get their teeth cut."

After putting up their dogs in Fairbanks, Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill deposited the amount due Pete Mateese to Pete's credit, and then strolled over to the office of the Chena Development for a chat with Ramsey, one of the old-timers who had settled down to the new order of mining. Neither noticed the small weasel-faced man who, from a sheltering doorway, followed their every move with malevolent eyes.

"Stuck my money in the bank where I won't *never* see it no more!" muttered the man. "Beat me out of it—an' it was mine, fair and square! If that chechahco didn't know no better'n to buy me out, that was his fault, not mine!" He shook his fist at the retreating backs, and breathed his threat: "But I'll git even! You jist wait!"

CHAPTER NINE

Mr. Squigg Again

As THE two disappeared into Ramsey's office, Squigg halted suddenly in his tirade and a crafty look stole into his eyes. For some moments he stood as a new idea took form. "O-ho, so that's yer game! Chena Development, eh? So all this talk about goin' broke is the bunk, eh? It ain't no lie about Ten Bow bein' worked out; they're clean down to the end. Then that means that Big Buck hain't dry! Ramsey hain't no fool. He hain't buyin' no dry crick. They're aimin' to sell out to Ramsey an' move the Ten Bow works over acrost—that's what that good road was built fer.

"I was a fool to believe 'em when they said Big Buck had went dry. My hotel site on Big Buck is a good buy, after all. I see through their game. They told me it wasn't no good, an' planned to send someone to buy it off'n me cheap an' ketch me comin' an' goin', the dirty crooks!

"But I'll fix 'em! They figger on gittin' mebbe

a hundred thousan' for that Ten Bow plant. The Chena outfit couldn't put up one like it fer twict that; stuff comes high, back off the river. They figger on tearin' it down an' movin' it acrost on that good road—but they ain't figgered on Squigg! I got a long score to settle with that there kid. Jist wait till I git through, an' we'll see how much they'll git fer—ashes!"

As Mr. Squigg stood there muttering, a man passed slowly up the street. The man was accompanied by four trail-weary dogs hitched to a sled. A smile of contempt twisted the thin lips of Mr. Squigg.

"The chechahco," he muttered. "Up lookin' for a job, I guess. If he'd had sense enough to hang onto his money when he had it, he wouldn't need no job."

And the man saw Mr. Squigg. The sight caused his heart to quicken beneath his parka, but his pace did not falter, nor by so much as the flicker of an eyelash did he betray recognition. He passed on up the street, put up his dogs and fed them liberally. After a hearty dinner at the hotel he hunted up the United States commissioner, and that official listened attentively as the man told his story. At its conclusion he shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Sell, that the law can afford you no relief. There is nothing in your

statement that would brand the transaction as illegal."

"But I can prove that Squigg knew, at the time he sold me the property, that Kaitok Landing was going to be abandoned in the spring!"

"I have no doubt that he knew it, but even admitting that he did, he was under no legal obligation to inform you of the fact."

"It was every cent I had in the world. My wife and I—we thought we could do better with it up here than we could down in the States."

"That's too bad," said the commissioner sympathetically. "I know that scoundrel, Squigg. He's been in trouble several times, but somehow he always manages to wriggle out. I wish we could get him right sometime—believe me, I'd soak him for the limit."

Without a word Sell arose and turned toward the door, where the commissioner halted him with a word of kindly advice. "I've been in the country longer than you have. I'd suggest that you run the hotel at Kaitok till the camp busts up, and then come on up to Fairbanks. There will be plenty of work here this summer, and you can at least make a good living. Drop in, if you decide to come up, and I'll see what I can do for you."

"Thank you, sir," answered the man, "I think

I'll take your advice. I'll be going back to Kaitok—but first I've got a little chore to do. Good day, sir."

"Good day," answered the commissioner, noting with approval the resolute gleam in Sell's blue eyes. "Good day—and good luck!"

Mr. Squigg stood in the entrance of the hotel as Thomas G. Sell emerged from the office of the commissioner and paused a moment, blinking, to accustom his vision to the bright sunlight reflected from the snow. Something he read in the face of the man he had cheated moved the soul of Mr. Squigg to sudden unrest, and before the other's eyes had adjusted themselves to the snow glare, he popped through the door of the hotel. With unseemly haste he crossed the room to the desk and demanded his score, paid it with one eye on the street door, and departed hurriedly through the back door.

Mr. Squigg had spent the time since dinner in packing his belongings. It had been his intention to slip quietly out of Fairbanks under cover of darkness, hit the trail to Ten Bow, and there perform a certain act that he fondly anticipated would work serious injury upon Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill.

But the sight of Thomas G. Sell in Fairbanks prompted Mr. Squigg to depart at once. There-

fore, in great haste he proceeded to harness his dogs.

Having stepped from the commissioner's office and accustomed his eyes to the snow glare, Thomas G. Sell proceeded to walk leisurely up the street in the direction of the hotel. And as he walked, he reflected calmly upon his course. Mr. Squigg had deliberately wronged him; he therefore deserved punishment—if not at the hands of the law, then at the hands of Thomas G. Sell. It did not seem wrong—rather it seemed eminently fit and proper that he should seek out Mr. Squigg and give him a sound drubbing. Such chastisement would doubtless cause Mr. Squigg to think well before cheating another. Therefore, as the man walked up the street, he breathed deeply of the crisp, clean air, and regarded himself as a public benefactor as his eyes glanced here and there in their search for Mr. Squigg.

Turning in at the hotel, he went over to the clerk's desk.

"Anyone by the name of Squigg stopping here?" he asked.

"Squigg? Nope. Was. Jest checked out."

"You mean he's pulled out—left town?"

The clerk nodded. "Guess that's about the size of it."

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"Nope. Friend of yours?"

"Well, not exactly," answered the other dryly. "I don't suppose you noticed which way he headed?"

The clerk met the man's eyes, hesitated, and cleared his throat. "Well, of course, Mr. Sell, this ain't no information bureau. But if I remember right, someone come bustin' in the front door a few minutes ago like a man which his time was valuable, an' paid his bill, an' departed, usin' the back door in some haste. If I wanted this here Squigg, I'd figger he might be harnessin' dogs——" The clerk grinned as he was interrupted by the slamming of the back door.

This same slamming sound attracted the attention of Mr. Squigg, who was in the act of heading his six-dog team out onto the street.

"Hey, come back here!" yelled Thomas G. Sell.

Mr. Squigg heard, but he did not heed. Instead, he dropped the tail rope, leaped onto the sled and, urging his dogs to full speed, disappeared from sight.

Sell hurried to the street, where he paused and watched the rapidly moving outfit dwindle in the distance. Then he turned and reëntered the hotel.

"See him?" asked the clerk.

"Yes," replied Sell. "I saw him—but only for a second. You were right about his being in a hurry."

"Oh, well," said the clerk philosophically. "It's fifty-fifty—one of you's satisfied, anyway."

"Yes," grinned Sell. "This time it's Squigg. It'll be my turn next."

He paid for his dinner, and proceeded to harness his dogs, which were much refreshed by their three-hour rest. Pausing only long enough to add a few pounds of provisions to his outfit, he struck out on the trail of Mr. Squigg.

CHAPTER TEN

The Chechahco

THOMAS G. SELL possessed one attribute that, more than any other, tends to make sourdoughs out of chechahcos. This attribute was dogged persistence in doing the thing that he set out to do. It was this that had brought him to Alaska. Both he and his wife were of hardy pioneer stock. Even as their ancestors had done, they, too, would have their part in the upbuilding of a great frontier. Their venture into the North was not made in response to the call of vast riches. They followed no stampede. They followed the irresistible call of the blood that was in their veins—a blood that held the petty comforts of civilization to be small return for being blended into the dead level of civilization's average citizen.

For years, working together, they had built up a business, the earnings from which, they had fondly hoped, would ultimately allow them to reach their goal. Then, quite unexpectedly, a boom had hit their city; and they had sold out,

turned their backs forever on the land of electric lights, street cars, and cafeterias, and journeyed to the land of tallow candles, dog teams, and flapjacks.

Carefully avoiding the beaten paths of the summer tourist, they had arrived eventually at Kaitok Landing, a mining camp apparently in full swing of activity. The hotel at Kaitok was doing a good business. Its proprietor was Mr. Squigg, who soon wormed out the information that his new guest had some money, and intended to invest it. Well, here was an investment, Mr. Squigg confided—a good one, right under Mr. Sell's nose. Why not buy the hotel? Mr. Squigg must sell, as his mining interests on the Tanana would soon require his whole attention—he was opening up a new proposition. Would Mr. Squigg show his books? Mr. Squigg would—and did. The investment looked like a good one. Mr. Sell bought the hotel, and Mr. Squigg promptly departed from Kaitok Landing. It was not until several days after his departure that Sell learned that the mines had petered out, and that the camp was soon to be abandoned. The manager of the mines told him, and advised him to go to Fairbanks and see the commissioner, as he himself could swear that Squigg had knowledge of the fact. So, with his family comfortably

housed and provisioned, the man set out for Fairbanks—and now he was leaving Fairbanks, on the trail of Mr. Squigg.

Of all this Sell thought as he mushed along steadily behind his dogs. There was anger in his heart—the honest anger of a man against one who has wronged his loved ones. He would find Mr. Squigg, and administer well-deserved punishment. After that, he would return and look for a job.

As the trail lifted out of the valley, the man wondered where Mr. Squigg might be going. He knew that Mr. Squigg was following a well-defined trail, and that the trail led toward the east. Also, he knew that somewhere to the eastward lay the Canadian Yukon—maybe a hundred miles away—maybe a thousand. It made no difference, nor did it make any difference that Mr. Squigg had six fresh dogs and he had four tired ones. He did not have to overtake Mr. Squigg that day, nor the next, nor in a week, nor a month, for that matter. Eventually he would overtake him. Mr. Squigg could not go on indefinitely. Eventually, he would arrive at his destination, and eventually there he would be overtaken. Sell did not force the trail. Rigidly he held his dogs to a walk, reasoning that as Squigg knew him to be a chechahco, he would

not expect him to follow, and would soon slow his own pace.

Darkness came and Sell camped for three hours, boiled a pot of tea, and rested his dogs. Then the moon rose and, harnessing the dogs, he mushed on for four hours, camped, fed the dogs, and spread his blankets. The first gray of the morning found him once more on the trail. He came upon Mr. Squigg's camp a few miles farther on, and figured the man not more than ten or twelve miles ahead of him. From time to time he examined the trail and noted with satisfaction that Squigg was frequently riding his sled, but not once did Sell mount his own sled.

On the third day the weather thickened. The sky became overcast, the wind rose, and there was snow in the air. As Sell mushed on, he noted that the fresh tracks left by Squigg were already blurred dim by the fine, sifting snow.

Soon after noting that he came upon that bane of the traveler of uncharted ways—a fork in the trail. Sell pondered the situation. New snow covered the faint track Squigg's sled had left on the hard-packed trail. The fork seemed a perfect Y and for all that appeared on the surface, Squigg might have taken either trail.

Sell faced a dilemma. But there was good sourdough timber in Sell, the chechahco; so he used his brains and eventually he did the thing any sourdough would have done without hesitation—he broke off a spruce branch and carefully dusted the new snow off the trail, and after two or three uncertainties, came at last upon the unmistakable track of Squigg's sled on the trail that bore to the left.

The snow continued in squalls that alternately veiled and disclosed the mountains. Toward mid-afternoon Sell noted that he was approaching a high divide. He decided to camp somewhere near the summit for fear of overrunning a fork, or a side trail in the darkness. Near outlines were blurring when the man halted suddenly upon the edge of a small plateau at a point where the trail headed straight for the sheer rock wall of a beetling cliff.

A little cabin stood close beside the trail. The man studied it tensely. But no glimmer of light showed from within, and no dogs challenged his presence; so he boldly approached the door and knocked loudly. Receiving no response, he lifted the latch and entered. A tallow candle thrust into the neck of a bottle stood upon the table, and striking a match, Sell held it to the wick,

which soon sputtered into flame. On the wall above the table the man saw a typewritten notice. He read:

“THIS CABIN IS FOR THE CONVENIENCE OF TRAVELERS. HALF MILE OF DANGEROUS TRAIL AHEAD TO SUMMIT. CAMP HERE IN CASE OF STORM OR DARKNESS. HELP YOURSELF. LEAVE PREMISES AS CLEAN AS YOU FOUND THEM. LEAVE KINDLING FOR THE NEXT FELLOW.

ANTRIM & MORGAN
TEN BOW TEN MILES BEYOND SUMMIT.”

Sell glanced at the bunk with its clean blankets, at the stove with the pile of dry firewood beside it, and at the shelves stocked with provisions. “Antrim & Morgan, eh—well, whoever they are, I call this pretty white of ’em! And this Ten Bow—I suppose that’s a camp. I’ve got a hunch that at Ten Bow I’ll find Squigg.”

Mr. Squigg was a physical coward, in proof whereof it may be cited that he always carried a pistol in a country where men are not given to the carrying of pistols. And so, as he stood in the sheltering doorway in Fairbanks and watched Thomas G. Sell mush past him up the street, he had experienced a peculiar sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Then Mr. Squigg had felt a sudden urge to quit the proximity of Thomas G. Sell. And he had acted accordingly. When Sell had stepped through the back door of the hotel and called to him as he pulled out, he had answered by urging his dogs to their utmost. Not until the trail began its ascent from the valley did he reduce his speed. After all, Sell was a chechahco, his dogs were tired, and he couldn't follow, even if he would. He would tell his troubles to the commissioner, find out he had no legal redress, and then mush back to Kaitok Landing. Mr. Squigg resolved to give Kaitok Landing wide berth. He would spend the balance of the winter on the Canadian Yukon, stopping en route to take his revenge on Connie Morgan.

"Thought he'd git the best of me—the dirty little pup!" he growled. "But I'll fix him. There ain't no one kin do me dirt an' git away with it—leastwise, not no kid."

Mr. Squigg took it easy—frequently riding the sled, where he amused himself, from time to time, by snicking a dog with his long-lashed whip.

On the afternoon of the third day out, he halted and surveyed the little cabin near the summit of the Ten Bow Divide. Inside, he knew,

were all the requisites for the trail-weary traveler, and his lips curled in a sneer as he passed on.

"I'll take care of you when I come back," he muttered, and headed onto the dangerous half mile of trail. The fine, driving snow offered no obstacles to one familiar with winter travel, and soon the man had reached the summit and started down the long ten-mile descent to Ten Bow. Within a mile of the deserted camp he halted and surveyed the buildings. Dusk was settling.

"I'd ort to do it now," he reasoned, "an' the snow would cover my trail. But I couldn't make the cabin till way into the night, an' I hain't agoin' to tackle that piece of trail in the dark—gosh! If a man should fall off!" He shuddered. "No, sir—not me! I'll camp till jest before daylight, an' then I'll touch her off an' by the time I git to the divide it'll be daylight. I hope the snow holds."

The snow held. Not a blizzard, or a heavy downfall—just a fitful storm that would cover tracks an hour after they were made. Squigg breakfasted long before dawn, harnessed his dogs, toggled them where they were, and then proceeded swiftly toward the abandoned camp on foot.

Soon he stood in the lee of the big office building. Carefully calculating the direction of the wind, he decided that this particular building lay just right for his purpose. Passing along its wall, he tried the door. It opened readily and he entered. Feeling his way about, he entered several rooms, and ransacking desks, shelves, and waste baskets, collected paper that he carefully piled against the thin wooden partitions. Then he produced matches and, passing rapidly back from one to the other, lighted the piles of paper and watched the flames leap upward as the dry spruce woodwork snapped and crackled. The building was rapidly filling with smoke and, rushing down the hall, Squigg kicked out two windows; then he dashed for the door, which he threw open, thus creating a draught under which the fire roared like a blast furnace. One backward glance, as he sprang into the open, convinced him that the building was doomed—and not only the office building, but most of the other buildings that constituted the camp of Ten Bow.

Then suddenly he shrank, cowering, against the burning building. Somewhere, a dog was barking furiously!

For several moments Squigg crouched, petrified with fear. Was there someone left in Ten

Bow? Common report in Fairbanks had it that the big camp was deserted. But whose dog was barking? Surely not one of his own—they were native dogs, Malemutes and Huskies, and they never barked! The wall against which he crouched was getting hot, the roar of the flames was increasing, and the circle of firelight was rapidly widening. Springing into action, Mr. Squigg made a dash for the outer darkness in the direction of the trail, but just as he rounded the corner of the pump house, a shot rang out, and a splinter flew from a board close to his head.

Redoubling his speed, Squigg plunged on through the darkness. Falling, getting up, whimpering like an animal in his fright, he gained his outfit, and loosening his dogs, headed them up the trail and threw himself, nearly exhausted, upon the sled.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Fire!

ROARING MIKE O'REILLY opened his eyes and yawned prodigiously. What was that noise—a dog barking? That one with the collie strain—moose, probably. Yawning again, Roaring Mike rolled over, and his glance rested on the window. What! Daylight already! Suddenly he was on his feet in the middle of the floor. That was no daylight—reddish wavering glare. It was fire!

Two steps carried him to the door, which he flung open. The office building, just across the creek, was a seething mass of flames. A glance told him that the whole camp was doomed. As he stared horrified he distinctly saw the form of a man dash from the building and head toward the pump house. Reaching for his rifle, he fired just as the figure disappeared around the corner of the building. He did not know whether he had hit or missed. Throwing aside the gun, he began to dress with feverish haste, and in a few minutes he was out harnessing his dogs.

Catching up his rifle, he led the way across the creek. Nothing he could do would check the flames. But he must get the man who had run from the burning building!

Immediately he encountered an impasse. The trail led directly past the door of the burning office building, and the man saw instantly that it would be impossible to get the dogs to face the intense heat. Twenty precious minutes were lost in working the outfit down through the deep snow and around the lower end of the camp. At the point where the trail began the ascent to the divide he paused and scrutinized the tracks in the new-fallen snow. The man had camped here, and a team of five or six dogs had been harnessed and left toggled while the man fired the camp. With a yell Roaring Mike O'Reilly started his five fresh dogs up the trail. "He's got a short team, the same as I have," he reasoned. "I'll catch him sure! He's got an outfit—and I'm light!"

Roaring Mike favored his dogs. With a hand on the tail rope he ran behind the empty sled as the dogs took the long grade at an easy lope. Halfway up the slope, the man glanced to the eastward, and his eyes brightened. "He can't have more than a half hour's start, and I'll bet I've cut that down. I'm sure glad, though, that

daylight will be here before I hit that bad piece of trail. I'd hate to take that stretch on the run in the dark!"

In the little cabin on the plateau near the summit, Sell struck a match and looked at his watch. "Daylight in an hour," he muttered, and touched a match to the dry shavings in the stove and fed the dogs. Finishing his breakfast, he washed the dishes, made up the bunk and, stepping out, chopped wood and kindling to replace that he had used. Closing the door carefully behind him, he harnessed his dogs and led the way toward the piece of dangerous trail.

At the rock cliff he halted and looked about him. Ahead, the trail was faintly visible in the slowly increasing light. He stepped to the edge and peered down into the dim, mysterious depths and turned away with a shrug.

"Guess I'll let the lead dog pick out the trail," he muttered; "he ought to be better at it than I am. Gosh, if a man should blunder over the edge!"

Stepping to the rear of the sled, he grasped the tail rope and spoke to the dogs. Without hesitation they walked out onto the narrow shelf that wound along the irregular face of the cliff.

It grew light rapidly, and Sell could distin-

guish, far down, the outline of rocks and spruce trees. Sharp rock shoulders every few rods prevented any view of the trail ahead, and the lead dog proceeded at a slow walk, holding cautiously back from the edge.

"I wonder whether Squigg will be at Ten Bow, or if he has gone on," the man speculated. "Anyway, I'm not wasting time. I'm going to stick in this country, and the more I can learn about it, the better. The way to learn the tricks of the trail is to get out and trail. I'm——"

The soliloquy came to an abrupt termination and the man all but sprawled forward over the sled as it came to a sudden halt. The air was filled with savage growls and snarls, and beyond the sled he could make out a tangle of fighting dogs. Another team, evidently coming on the run, had piled into his own team at the angle of a rock shoulder, and the two teams were hopelessly massed in a slashing, gnashing tangle of savage hate.

Close against the rock wall, the dogs reared high; then, as though rebounding from the shock, they weaved toward the outer edge. A dog lost his footing and swung over, his four feet clawing frantically for a hold. Another dog followed, and in a moment half the dogs were hang-

ing over the edge, held by the tangled harness. Grasping his tail rope in both hands, Sell braced for the pull, but slowly, dragged by the weight of the frantic dogs, the sled moved closer and closer to the final plunge. Then—over it went. Sell let go—just in time to see a man, flat on his belly, following his own sled over the edge, dragged by the tail rope tied to his wrist.

With a lunge, Sell flung himself forward and grasped the leg of the man—his own legs spread wide apart and his toes dug in. The man was even then over the edge as far as his waist. The drag was terrific. Suddenly the strain eased and Sell, his face already over the edge, saw the whole mass of sleds and dogs drop into the depths. He tightened his hold on the man who hung so helplessly over the ledge. The stranger struggled feebly.

“Hold still!” gasped Sell, panting for breath—and forced himself to rest an instant. He noticed, dangling from the man’s wrist, the frayed end of the broken tail rope.

“The fool!” he thought swiftly. “Tying that rope to his wrist! It must have been pretty old, but at that it’s a wonder the weight of those two outfits didn’t jerk his hand off before the strands gave way.”

Aloud, he said: "Just hold still till I get my wind. I'll pull you back all right—somehow. But don't wiggle—my arms are numb already."

The man craned a white face upward and Sell found himself staring straight down into the terrified eyes of Mr. Squigg!

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Arrest

THE recognition was mutual. The face of Mr. Squigg suddenly contorted in a spasm of terror. The man whose grip alone stood between him and a horrible death was the chechahco he had defrauded! Mr. Squigg closed his eyes, and a low moan escaped him.

“Shut up! Don’t lose your nerve!” came the command from above, and with a gleam of hope, Squigg opened his eyes. The voice was speaking again. “Just a minute, now! I’m getting a toe-hold in a crack. There—keep quiet till I work my weight onto your leg—now, I can spare one arm——”

An arm extended and a hand dropped down as far as Mr. Squigg’s belt. “Get hold of my sleeve, and work yourself up,” commanded the man, and reaching upward Squigg grasped the sleeve with both his hands, and bending his body drew himself cautiously upward until he succeeded in hooking an elbow over the edge of the rock

ledge. "Hang on for a second till I get a grip on your collar," said the man, and a moment later Mr. Squigg was jerked, weak and trembling, onto the snow of the trail, where he cowered before Thomas G. Sell.

Sell viewed the cowering figure with contempt. So this was the man he had trailed miles to overtake so that he might wreak physical vengeance upon him! This sniveling, cringing caricature of a man! "Bah," said Sell, aloud, "I'd as soon kick a dog!"

From a distance came the sound of a shout. Sell glanced up the trail, but his vision was cut off by the rock shoulder where Squigg's team had piled into his own. Again it sounded, a man's shout to his dogs. Squigg, too, heard the sound, and Sell noted the look of fear that leaped into his eyes. "Git outa my way! I gotta go!" he cried, leaping toward Sell who barred the way.

But the other stood firm, blocking the narrow trail. "What's your hurry?" he asked.

With a gleam of murderous hate in his eyes, Squigg stepped back, slipped his hand beneath his coat, and drew a pistol from its place of concealment. Like a flash, Sell was upon him, and the gun dropped into the snow as the wrist was twisted in a mighty grip. "You would, would you? You dirty tripe—after I pulled you back

from *that!*" He picked up the pistol and tossed it over the edge. "I've got half a mind, now, to finish up what I set out to do! I ought to lick you to within an inch of your miserable life!"

"Lemme go! Lemme go! I wouldn't of shot you. I——"

"You wouldn't, huh! You'd have shot me like a dog!"

"Lemme go!" begged the man frenziedly. "I'll give yer money back! I'll git it, somehow, an' give it back! They'll ketch me, an' I'll go to the pen!"

"Bribing me, eh? No go! You'll stay right where you are."

"Oh, lemme git by! Lemme git by!" screamed the man. "I'd—I'd ruther gone over there along of the dogs!"

"Suit yourself," offered Sell. "The canyon's still there."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when around the shoulder of rock burst a dog team. So suddenly they came that the two men on the trail had just time to press back against the rock wall to avoid being crowded over the edge as the five-dog team swept past. But the sled was empty as it passed, and there at the angle of the trail stood a man, a rifle raised to his shoulder—and a sharp word of command on his lips.

"Stick 'em up!"

Instantly the arms of Mr. Squigg and of Thomas G. Sell flew upward.

"So there are two of you, eh?" said a voice behind the gun.

Sell laughed. "Yes, there's two of us—one of him, and one of me. I was coming up the trail and he was coming down. Our dogs tangled up and went over the edge. He nearly went with them—had the tail rope tied to his wrist. But I managed to hold him till the rope gave out just in the nick of time—must have been old and rotten—and then I pulled him back. He seems to be in something of a hurry, for when I wouldn't let him pass, he pulled a gun on me——"

"It's a lie!" piped Mr. Squigg. "It was me comin' up the trail an' him comin' down. He was comin' so fast I couldn't git out of the way! When he heered you holler at yer dogs he like to throw'd a fit, he was that scairt. What's he been doin'? He's a bad-lookin' character. Better not take no chances. You kin count on me——"

"That'll do," interrupted Roaring Mike. "There seems to be a little misunderstanding somewhere. One of you must be mistaken. I'm a deputy marshal and you're both under arrest; so just turn around and mush back to that travelers' cabin, where we can straighten this

out. And don't try any monkey work or this rifle's liable to go off."

Finding themselves driverless, Roaring Mike's dogs had swerved from the trail and lay panting on the snow before the cabin as the three men reached the little plateau.

The two prisoners were walking ahead when suddenly Sell's arm shot out and his fingers twisted themselves into Squigg's collar.

"Hold on, there!"

Without releasing his grip, Sell turned to face the speaker, snapping Squigg about in his tracks. He grinned into the muzzle of the rifle. "Didn't you notice him scuffling up the new snow? One of us spent the night here in the cabin. I'm under the impression it was me. Over there's the tree where I cut wood and kindling a little while ago. If you'll just examine the tracks before he gets them all scuffed out, I think you'll be able to tell which one of us is speaking the truth."

Roaring Mike laughed. "Oh, I had you two sorted out, quite a way back. I had him pegged the minute he started scuffling, and there were a lot of tracks he missed. You're released from arrest. Just step over to the cabin and see if you can find a piece of rope to tie his hands with while we figure out what's to be done."

"What you want him for?" asked Sell when

he had finished securing Squigg to a stanchion of the bunk.

"Arson, I think the books call it," answered Roaring Mike. "He slipped in last night and set fire to Ten Bow. I guess the whole camp's gone by now."

"Whew!" whistled Sell. "And where do you go from here?"

"Got to get him before the commissioner down at Fairbanks."

"It's a lie!" whined Squigg. "I didn't set no fire. It was a accident——"

"Tell that to the judge and the jury," advised O'Reilly.

"I won't git no fair show! Everyone's agin me! I ain't got a friend in the world!"

Sell eyed the man speculatively. "Sounds reasonable, at that," he observed. "For once in your life, I believe you've told the truth." He turned to the other. "How are we going to get to Fairbanks? You haven't any outfit on your sled, and mine's in the bottom of the canyon."

O'Reilly's eyes swept the shelves. "Guess there's plenty here," he replied. "We don't need much for a three-day trip, and here's a couple of pairs of blankets. Traveling light. we should make good time."

"I'll ride the sled then!" proclaimed Mr.

Squigg. "I'm light, an' I hain't goin' to do no fast trailin' a-foot."

Roaring Mike grinned. "You'll run, or you'll drag," he retorted. "That stunt of tying yourself to the tail rope will come in pretty handy."

"I know my rights," whined the man. "If I'm a prisoner, I git three meals a day, an' I git them blankets to sleep in, too. It'll take two pair to keep warm!"

"You got some swell ideas about yourself—if they work," laughed O'Reilly, as he and Sell secured the lashings of the light load.

Despite his whining threats, Squigg's hands were freed, and he was secured to the tail rope of the sled by his wrist, and was soon trotting over the trail—preferring that to dragging, but protesting whenever he had breath to spare.

"I hain't got no square deal!" he whined. "Yer two to one agin me, an' the judge'll be agin me—an' the jury! I never had no luck!"

"A man'll get about what's coming to him, in the long run," Sell told him grimly. "Reputations are earned. They're not a matter of luck."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At the Commissioner's

DICK COLTON, commissioner, greeted Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill with a grin as the two partners entered his office in Fairbanks. "Hello. I heard about Ten Bow peterin' out, an' the hard luck you had with Big Buck. But you must have a fortune apiece salted away; so it won't worry you much."

Waseche Bill grinned. "Yo' ain't only a couple of fortunes off on yo' guess, Dick," he answered.

The commissioner's face became suddenly grave. "You don't mean you're busted!" he exclaimed; "why, man, you two've had one of the best propositions in Alaska! You were big!"

"Yeah," agreed Waseche, "but the earthquake was biggah. It done ruint us complete."

"Gosh, that's too bad. If there's anything I can do, just name it."

Connie laughed. "Nothing, I guess, Dick, unless you can pry up that mountain and give us back our water. We've got to start all over."

"What do you mean?"

"Prospecting. We're going to hit out in the morning and make a new strike."

"Prospectin'! Why, the whole country's been gone over with a fine-tooth comb!"

"How about north of the Yukon?" asked Connie. "Far north. There's plenty of rivers and creeks up there that have never been scratched."

"You're right," Dick Colton admitted slowly. "But have you stopped to think why those rivers and creeks haven't been scratched?"

"Yup," answered Connie. "Tough country up there. The boys have passed it up. But listen here. Within a year from now I'll bet there'll be a stampede—to some crick you've never heard of—and when she comes, just remember this—Waseche and I'll be filed on discovery!"

The big hand of the commissioner fell upon the boy's shoulder. "That's the talk, son! By golly, if anyone can do it, you two can!" His eyes sought the window and rested upon far peaks, and his fingers worked restlessly. "Do you know, I—I wish I was goin' along!"

"Come on," invited Waseche Bill. "Git yo' cap. You dog-gone ol' sourdough! It wouldn't be the first time we'd prospected togethah."

"There's no one I'd rather have along, Dick," urged Connie. "You know, you're the first man

that ever spoke to me in Alaska. Do you remember?"

"Remember, son? I guess I do! Down there on the dock at Anvik. Just a little ragged kid, huntin' fer his dad—an' when you told me you was Sam Morgan's boy—gosh!"

"Get your cap," said Connie.

Dick Colton's hands were clenching and unclenching—slowly.

"Remember Hesitation, when we was all po' as do'-mice," insinuated Waseche Bill. "But—she was a good camp, Dick."

"*Shut up!* Dog-gone it—shut up!" The words of the commissioner rang sharply, but the eyes he turned on the two partners were full of pleading. "I can't do it, boys. I'd like to, better than anything else in the world—and you know it. But—I've got my work cut out here. This job—and the way things are shaped, politically—you know what would happen if we old-timers didn't keep the upper hand. But I'll tell you this—a year from now, if I can get things shaped up, and if there's a stampede—you'll see Dick Colton right on the head of it."

A murmur of voices sounded from without, and the door opened to admit the form of Mr. Squigg, who entered, evidently much against his

will. He was immediately followed by two others, one of whom closed the door carefully behind him.

"Hello, Mike! What yo' doin' heah?" asked Waseche, in surprise at his erstwhile stenographer. "Yo' supposed to be ovah on Ten Bow watchin' the camp."

"Ten Bow won't need watching from now on," answered Roaring Mike. "She's burnt down."

"Burnt down!" cried Connie. "How in thunder could it burn down with no fire except in that cabin across the creek?"

For answer Roaring Mike pointed to Squigg. "He set it——"

"It's a lie!" screamed Squigg.

"Shut up!" ordered the commissioner. "You'll get your turn, later."

Roaring Mike told his story, and was corroborated by Sell as to the termination of the flight, and the capture.

The commissioner smiled as Sell finished. "You followed him quite a ways, didn't you? But I can't see that you used him very rough, at that."

Sell shook his head. "No. You see—after I'd pulled him back over the edge, I couldn't very well stand there and beat him up, could I? And

even after he'd pulled the gun on me I couldn't bring myself to it—somehow, I don't think there would have been any satisfaction in it."

"There hardly ever is," smiled the commissioner, "for right-thinkin' men. Fist fighting has got to be done on the spur of the moment—not deliberate." He turned abruptly upon Squigg. "An' now, you! What have you got to say for yourself?"

"It's a lie," whined the man. "I was goin' about my business. I bought some property off'n him." He paused and nodded toward Connie Morgan. "It was a hotel site over on Big Buck, an' I was goin' back fer to look it over——"

"Your transactions seem to run to hotels of late, don't they?"

Squigg ignored the question. "I come to Ten Bow camp late—er, early, I mean—'fore daylight. I'd be'n trailin' all night, an' I was tired an' cold an' hungry, an' I seen the buildin's, an' they wasn't no one there, an' I lit a fire in the stove an'——"

"Just a minute. You say you'd been trailin' all night? Where from?"

"On the trail from here."

"And you passed over that bad piece of trail in the darkness?"

"Yes, I did."

"But Sell just told us he was following your trail, and he stopped at the cabin before dark."

"He lied! He's sore at me, an' he lied."

"Go on."

Waseche Bill whispered to the commissioner, who interrupted with a question. "You're sure you lighted the fire in the stove—not on the floor, nor against the wall?"

"'Course I lit it in the stove——"

"And you're sure that this was in the office building?"

"Yes, it was in that buildin'—the big one—first one you come to. An' then I went back to git my outfit, an' when I come back the buildin' was all afire. Must of the stove tipped over, or a coal popped out——"

"What sort of stove was it?"

"Why, it was a stove—same as any stove—a cannon stove——"

Squigg stopped suddenly and glared into the laughing faces about him.

"That will do, I guess," said the commissioner. "The joke's on you, Squigg—an' the point of it is that there has never been a stove in that building. It was heated by steam. Guess I'll just bind you over to the spring term on about

twenty-five thousand dollars' bail. You can tell your story to the jury."

"I hain't got no twenty-five thousan'!" whimpered the man. "Everyone's got it in fer me! They won't no one put up nothin'! I'll have to go to jail."

"That's what I figured," answered the commissioner; "then we'll know where to find you when we want you. I imagine the insurance company will want to push this case—hard."

"Insurance company! What you mean—insurance company?" shrilled Squigg.

Connie Morgan smiled into the venomous eyes. "You see, Mr. Squigg," he explained, "as I told you the other day, Ten Bow has petered out, and Big Buck is worthless. So of course the Ten Bow buildings weren't worth much to us right now except for the building material in them, but they were insured, and we had to pay a watchman to look after them until the insurance expired next August. Well, we shan't have to do that any more—and our insurance will cover the loss on material all right."

The announcement threw Mr. Squigg into a paroxysm of rage. "You've beat me agin! You always beat me every way I turn! You git easy money—an' I go to jail——"

"Take him away!" ordered the commissioner,

and a moment later the door closed behind Roaring Mike O'Reilly and his raving prisoner.

Connie turned to the man who still remained in the office. "I heard Dick call you Sell," he said. "You don't happen to be the Thomas G. Sell who owns the hotel at Kaitok Landing, do you?"

"Why, yes—I'm the man. But——"

Connie interrupted with a grin. "What will you take for the hotel, just as she stands—cash on the spot?"

The man stared at the boy in surprise. "You—you mean you want to buy it?"

"Yes. How does twenty-five thousand in cash strike you? Is that a fair price?"

"That's just what I paid Squigg for it a few weeks ago."

"Will you sell it to me at that figure?"

The man shook his head slowly. "No," he answered. "I won't. You asked if twenty-five thousand was a fair price. It isn't. The fact is, the hotel's hardly worth anything. The camp's going to pull out in the spring, and the hotel will be left, as you might say, high and dry. I got stuck with it—I'll take my medicine."

"I see." And Connie nodded. But there was a twinkle back of his gravity. "Perhaps you won't need to take so much medicine as you think," he suggested as, reaching beneath his clothing, he

drew out a money belt, which he laid upon the desk. "I'm not too proud of the way I tricked this out of Squigg," he said as he opened the belt and counted out a roll of bills, "but just the same, the money does belong to you." And he extended the roll toward Sell, who, staring incredulously, made no move to take it. "Put it in your pocket—it's yours," said the boy.

"But I don't understand. I thought you said you were broke. That's your money—not mine."

"Not a cent of it is ours," laughed the boy, "and I never intended that it should be, or I'd feel cheaper than I do now about the way I got it." And he explained the transaction, not sparing himself in telling how Waseche Bill had condemned him for fighting trickery with trickery.

"By gosh!" Dick Colton ejaculated. "No wonder Squigg howled that you'd beat him every way he turned! Well, he needs plenty of beatin'!" He paused and nodded to Sell. "Take the money—it's yours. And this lad will be feelin' mean as dirt if you refuse it."

Sell took the money and slowly counted the bills. "Look here," he said to Connie, "I wish you'd take at least half of this. If you're broke, or nearly so, you'll need it."

Connie Morgan laughed. "Not a penny.

Man, I couldn't take any of it. Besides, Waseche and I are prospectors now—we'll strike a fortune soon, though we don't know yet just where." He stopped with a chuckle.

Waseche Bill and Dick Colton again fell to discussing the unexplored creeks and rivers north of the Yukon. Presently Sell interrupted.

"I'm wondering——" he said slowly. "You know, there's an old prospector down at my place, an old Irishman named Mike Costello. Folks claim he isn't all there, and I guess they're right. He's old, and broke, and all crippled up with rheumatism. He drifted into camp, and my wife and I felt sorry for him and took him in. He does a few odd jobs and putters around with the chores, but for the most part he sits close to the stove and mumbles about gold. It seems he's been way up north somewhere. He had a partner—an Ulsterman named Mog O'Donovan—and Costello loves him like a brother, but from what we can gather from his mutterings they must have spent most of their time fighting like the famous Kilkenny cats. I've tried to question him about where he's been, and what became of his partner, but I can't get anything out of him. He mumbles queer names, and then rambles off. We think his partner is dead or lost, and that the hardships Costello went through

have unhinged his mind. You people who know the country may be able to get something out of him—the names he mumbles mean nothing to me. If you're going north, why not stop over with me at Kaitok for a few days and question the old man? It's barely possible you might find out something of real value and, anyway, I'd like you to meet my wife and my two boys. She'll want to thank you for what you've done. It means a whole lot to us."

"We were going there anyway, if we hadn't run across you here," said Connie. "Maybe we might find out something from the old man. If his partner was lost up north somewhere, maybe we could find some trace of him. Did he say they made a strike?"

"No, I don't think they did. At least, he has nothing now. I figure they found just enough to keep them going—always looking for a strike farther on."

"Let's go!" said Connie. "How about pulling out early to-morrow morning?"

"Suits me. That'll give me time to get another outfit. Mine was lost."

"Never mind the outfit. We have plenty, and the trail is good down the river."

As the three passed out of the commissioner's office, Connie turned and waved his hand to Dick

Colton. "So long, Dick! See you in the spring—when you come riding up on the head of our new stampede!"

Dick Colton chuckled at Connie's chaffing. This was not quite good-by. He'd see the three men once more in the morning. But he sighed as the door of his Fairbanks office closed after the three. Good men, all of them—like other men of the North, the commissioner thought of young Connie Morgan as a man. And he knew of no men whom he liked better than Connie and Waseche Bill. He would have given a lot to be starting off with them on that gold-prospecting trip up in the almost unexplored regions beyond the Yukon.

What if his three callers had hit hard luck? They'd turn it into good luck. They were that kind.

Trust Connie Morgan and Waseche to pull up somehow even if they had lost just about all their pile when that earthquake jiggled a mountain down on Big Buck Creek and dammed up the stream so they couldn't get out the gold in that valley.

And Sell, the chechahco, the tenderfoot, had shown himself a good sort. He hadn't whined when that sharper Squigg had sold him a valueless Kaitok Landing hotel for twenty-five thou-

sand dollars—and afterward he had even saved Squigg's life, such as it was. A good man, Sell, Dick Colton reflected. It was fine that Connie had been able to get the chechahco's money back from Squigg.

Well, to-morrow the three would be on their way together. Connie and Waseche were going to stop at Sell's place to talk prospecting chances with a queer old Irish prospector Sell had befriended. They might learn something pretty useful from the old fellow. Dick Colton hoped they would. He wanted to see those game losers strike something big again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On the Long Trail

IT WAS early in the following morning when Connie Morgan, Waseche Bill, and Sell, the chechahco, pulled out of Fairbanks and headed down the Tanana. But, early as it was, Dick Colton, in his double capacity as United States commissioner and friend of many years' standing, was on hand to wish them luck. The commissioner's eyes rested longingly upon the trail outfit with its string of eight selected dogs.

"Gosh, you fellows are lucky!" he exclaimed.

Waseche Bill grinned. "Well—some folks wouldn't call it jest exactly lucky to go broke on as big a proposition as we had ovah yondah."

"Any man's lucky that's free to hit out an' prospect a swipe of country that ain't even been scratched!" The commissioner flipped off a mitten and extended his hand, palm upward. "Look at that hand—like a woman's! Not a callus on it, an' white as a shoe clerk's! An' it's right now itchin' to lay hold of a shovel handle, or an axe helve, or a windlass crank!"

"Get your cap, Dick," laughed Connie. "There's no one we'd rather have with us."

But Waseche Bill shook his head. "No, son. Dick's job's right heah. It's jest like he said yesterday—us old-timers have got to keep holt of things heah." He reached out and shook the commissioner's bared hand. "It's like Connie says: the's no one we'd ruther have with us. But yo' place is right heah. It's fo' the good of the country, Dick. An' we-all know it takes enough sight mo' nerve fo' yo' to stick to yo' desk than it does for us to face anything we've got to go up against—no mattah what it is. An' if we strike anything that looks good, yo'll be filed next to discovery. So long."

"So long, old-timer! So long, boy! Take care of yourselves. See you—when I see you!"

It was several miles down the trail before anyone spoke. "A good man—the commissioner," reflected Sell, the chechahco.

"They don't make 'em any bettah," said Waseche Bill. "He's had his ups an' his downs—an' he's always jest the same. They ain't only a few of 'em left—the old-timers. Most of them that come up is dead, or else they went back to wheah they come from. It's only the real men that stayed on—men that knows enough to know this heah's the only country on top of God's

earth that's fit to live in. Some of 'em's broke, an' some of 'em's rich—but that don't make no difference. Up heah, it ain't what a man's got, it's what he does, an' what he can be counted on to do, that counts."

Sell nodded. "It's a country for a man to live in," he said. "I'm glad my boys are going to grow up here."

Waseche Bill pointed a mittened hand toward Connie, who was mushing ahead of the dogs. "Yondah's one that did. He ain't plumb growed up yet—but he's comin' along. He hit the country when he was twelve years old, with ragged clo's an' eight dollahs in his pocket, huntin' his dad. An' when he found out his dad was dead, he stahted in to play the game—an' he's be'n playin' it evah since."

"I'm glad my boys will know him," said Sell. "He's sure some man on the trail. Does he keep up that pace all day?"

Waseche laughed. "He would if we'd let him. But we won't. I ain't so young as I used to be an', besides, I ain't done no trailin' lately to speak of." He raised his voice and called to the boy: "Heah, yo'! What do yo' think this is—the Alaska Sweepstakes? Slow down theah—an' how about a pot of tea?"

The boy swung the dogs from the trail toward

a thicket of spruce, and when the others arrived on the spot he was already breaking dry branches for the fire. He laughed into the faces of the two men. "I wasn't going so fast," he said. "A week from now you'd never have noticed the pace. I've had more trailing lately than you have—that's all."

The mail trail from Fairbanks to Tanana lies back from the river and, with its conveniently spaced roadhouses, the trip to the Yukon was uneventful to the point of monotony. Your real prospector is inherently an adventurer for whom the beaten trails hold no lure. Give him an unknown river with the grinding labor of breaking trail ahead of his dogs, of chopping portage trails through thick scrub, and the dangers of thin ice, of water under the snow, of freezing, of getting lost, of the dozen and one accidents that can "bush" him, with the necessity of making his own camp at the end of the day, often in storm, or in darkness, or both—and he is happy. But the beaten trail is merely a means of getting from one place to another in the shortest possible time.

The trail down the wind-swept Yukon was fast and on the evening of the second day after leaving Tanana, the outfit pulled into Kaitok Landing, where they received a warm welcome from Mrs. Sell and the two youngsters.

After supper, around the stove in the office of the hotel, old Mike Costello, the Irishman, talked. His warped but nimble brain leaped from snow trails to the peat bogs of Ireland and on to sewer digging in New York, almost within the same breath. Gradually, however, through tactful questioning, peat bogs and sewers were eliminated, and the old man's wits centered upon Alaska and his lost partner, Mog O'Donovan.

"A-ha, that Mog! A grand lad, but an Ulsterman from Donegal, an' a pig-headed Protestant, but, mind ye, 'twas borned in um, an' none av his fault. 'Twas years ago Oi met up wid um in Noo York. We was doin' pick an' shovel work fer a contractor, an' barrin' mesilf, he was the best hand wid a shovel on th' job. Not, mebbe, what you'd call a fancy shoveler, but he'd throw out more durt to the ton than any two, barrin' mesilf. Whin hard times come we wint west an' worked in th' mines at Butte, an' thin on to 'Frisco. Whin the talk was av gold in Alasky, we come up, an' fer a long time we worked in the Klondike. 'Twas a cold country. Noo York was better, an' 'Frisco best av all. In 'Frisco we——"

"Yes," interrupted Waseche Bill. "An' from the Klondike you drifted ovah heah?"

"Naw. We'd saved a bit from our wages an' we hit out f'r oursiles—huntin' gold."

"When was that?" asked Connie.

"'Twas three year agone—no, two."

"And where did you go, to hunt for gold?"

"Cricks, an' rivers, an' mountains, an' timber, an' no timber agin enough f'r a fire, an' snow an' cold, an' plenty to ate, an' nawthin' to ate, an' daylight all night, an' dark all day, an' Injuns wid bone fish-hooks an' spears, an' back agin ut's mebbe halfways, an' thin th' gold in the gravel, an' the flag av owld Oireland wavin' on th' pole, an' thin the bickerin' an' quarrelin' till Mog drew an orange on the flag. 'Twas a grand fight we had, an' Mog pulled out, an' Oi changed the name to Kerry Crick, an' stayed on in the cabin till me grub run out an' thin Oi come back."

"Where is Kerry Crick?" asked Connie.

"Could you go back to it?"

A crafty gleam shot from the old man's eyes.

"A-ha, ye'd try to find out where the gold is, wud ye? But ye'll not. No, Oi cud not go back. Av Oi cud, Oi'd go to-morry, f'r Oi'm afraid somethin's happened to Mog, an' him the best pal a man iver had, if an Ulsterman, which he can't help ut."

Waseche Bill leaned forward and laid a hand on the man's knee. "S'pose we-all jest stop an' figger things out. That crick yo' found will be refound sometime, an' it'll be filed from one end

to the othah, an' yo' unrecorded claim will be jumped. Yo' won't get nothin'. But we-all is goin' on a prospectin' trip. Now, if yo' was to tell us all yo' know'd about how to get to this crick of yo'n, an' we could find it, we'd stake yo' out a good claim, an' yo' pardner, too—jest as good claims as we staked fo' ourselves. Of co'se, the chances is, we might nevah find the place, but it's a chanst, an' it looks to me like it's the only chanst yo've got fo' to locate yo' claim or yo' partner, eithah one."

"Sure, an' how do Oi know ye'd iver stake me a claim? An' how do Oi know ye wouldn't murder poor Mog O'Donovan f'r the gold he's got, if any? Sure, the world is full av crooks an' thaves—didn't wan jist bate Mister Sell here out av all his money—an' him my bist frind."

Sell interrupted with a laugh. "That's true, Mike—but you haven't heard the other half of the story. That boy here, who is this man's partner, got all the money back for me—see, here it is, every cent of the twenty-five thousand I paid for this worthless hotel." He produced the bills and counted them before the astonished eyes of the Irishman.

"The saints be praised!" cried the old man.

"Yes, and he could have kept it all himself. I offered him half of it, but he wouldn't touch

a penny. I guess if there's anyone in the world you could trust it would be these two—maybe you've heard of them. That is Connie Morgan, and this is Waseche Bill——”

“Connie Margan. Waseche Bill,” the old man repeated, his hand fumbling at his forehead. Over and over, he repeated the names, and then he leaped to his feet.

“O'Brien—Pat O'Brien!” he cried. “An' ye're th' two that rescued Pat O'Brien from th' Injuns way up somewheres on a river that don't freeze, an' fetched um back safe an' sound!”

“Well,” grinned Waseche, “he done as much fetchin' back as we did. Mo'n I did—my laig was busted. Do yo' know O'Brien?”

“Know um—an' why shouldn't Oi know um? Bein' he's me father's sister's b'y, an' me own cousin to boot! Many's the time Pat's told me about ut, over in the Klondike, befoor me an' Mog O'Donovan hit out f'r oursiles.”

“I've often wondered what became of O'Brien,” said Connie.

“Sure, he's down to Floridy, where ut's warn th' year around—an' Oi wisht Oi was wid um!”

“If we could locate your claim, maybe you could go to Florida,” ventured Waseche.

Again the old man's hand fumbled at his fore-

head, and he sank back into his chair. "Av Oi cud ondly think ut out," he said. "Sure, now Oi'm knowin' who ye are, Oi'd trust ye wid me soul. But there's so many cricks, an' rivers, an' mountains—an' there was no trail——"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Costello Talks

"S'POSE we start in at the beginnin'," suggested Waseche, "an' maybe we can help yo' out. Let's see, wheah was it yo' started from?"

"Sure, from Ballyduff——"

"Ballyduff," repeated Waseche. "Don't seem like I'd heard of that camp. Is it ovah in the Klondike?"

"No, no! Ut's in Kerry—in Oireland."

"Oh, I see," grinned Waseche. "But s'pose we leave that part out an' start in wheah yo' an yo' partner started from on this heah prospectin' trip. Was it from Dawson?"

"No. From Circle. We'd be'n snipin' the bars along th' cricks, an' we'd got us a stake wid what we'd saved from our wages, an' we wint to Fort Yukon."

"An' yo' outfitted at Fort Yukon."

"Yes, an' crossed the Porkypine, an' tuk the portage trail f'r the Chandalar. We folleyed up the Chandalar—worked our way through that

howlin' gale that blows through the Chandalar Gap."

"An' then wheah did yo' go?" Waseche prompted.

"There's a cabin beyont the Gap, an' we camped there f'r a day, an' thin we hit the trail agin. We was glad to be off the flats, the country beyont the Gap bein' mountainous, an' f'r two days we folleyed the windin' river, blunderin' into overflow wather, an' poundin' ice off the toboggan, an' lookin' afther the dogs' feet. The trail goes up the West Fork a ways, thin swings from the river an' hits acrost the mountains to the South Fork of the Koyukuk. An' 'twas a mean an' hard road to travel. But we got to the Koyukuk, an' had to hole up two days f'r a blizzard wid niver a chanst to build a fire. Thin we folleyed down a ways an' up a crick, an' acrost a divide onto Slate Crick an' down Slate Creek to Coldfoot."

Waseche Bill nodded encouragingly. "I know every foot of that trail," he said, "and yo' suah know it, too. If yo' can tell the rest of it as good as yo've told the paht from Fort Yukon to Coldfoot, we'll find out what become of Mog O'Donovan—an', maybe, fetch him back to you."

"Oi'm doubtin' he's alive. Av he was, he'd be huntin' me up, f'r all the lickin' Oi give um. But

from Hammond River on, there's no trail at all—only cricks an' rivers an' mountains, an' divides. Coldfoot was all petered out, an' we went on to Nolan, an' Wiseman, an' then to Hammond River. But she's spotted up there, an' the good claims was all staked; so we hit out f'r to make a strike av our own. After that, ut was up wan crick an' acrost a divide, an' down another, an' another divide, an' up the nixt wan, an' so on till no wan knows how many divides we crossed, nor how many cricks we explored."

"An' didn't yo' find no color?"

"Sure, an' we found colors! We'd got way up past where any wan had been befoor an' on a crick we struck good pay clost to the top. They was some spruce on that crick, which they wasn't on most av um, except little twisted trees that wudn't hardly be a daycent weed in a garden patch. But on this crick the trees was foor or foive inches thick through, some av um, an' we built us a bit av a cabin. Mog found the crick, an' we took possession av ut in th' name av Oireland, an' called ut O'Donovan Crick. At Coldfoot they was an owld pool table that had been left behind, an' Oi cut a square av green cloth from ut, f'r Oi mistrusted we'd be explorin' new lands. So we stuck ut up on a pole f'r an Oirish flag, an' thin we started to wor-rk.

“Come fall Mog made a trip back to Wiseman, an’ fetched out a big load av grub. Fifty days ut took um to git back, an’ thin we settled down f’r the winter—burnin’ in, an’ when the shaft got dape enough, we rigged a win’lass. Well, as Oi mintioned befoor, Oi think, Mog was a foine lad, but an Ulsterman, an’ a Protestant, an’ the pig-headedest man in an argymint that iver grow’d whiskers. Back an’ foorth, we had ut all winter long. Him claimin’ flapjacks was slapjacks, an’ whin Oi said sourdough flapjacks was made av dough, he claimed that they was sourdough slapjacks, an’ they wasn’t made av dough, they was made av batther. Oi’ll lave ut to ye av ut ain’t flapjacks, an’ av sourdough ain’t dough, what is ut? Thin av Oi said, a toboggan was best, he’d stick up f’r a sled; an’ av Oi favored skis, he’d claim snowshoes had ’em bate a mile.

“Ut run along till the siventeenth av March, an’ Oi tuk down the flag an’ said we’d have a p’rade in honor av St. Patrick. But Mog he claimed St. Patrick was nothin’ but a snake-killin’ beggar av a Papist, an’ he wouldn’t march in his parade. So we had a good fight, an’ Mog licked me that toime; so I had th’ p’rade alone. Oi marched up an’ down th’ cricks f’r half a day an’ spint th’ afternoon smokin’ wid me back to a likely tree.

"We sluiced out good, an' along come the twilft' av Jooly, an' Mog he wanted to have a Orangeman's p'rade. Think av th' nerve av a man wantin' to p'rade in honor av such a dirty scoundral as Will'um av Orange! An' Oi towld um so. But p'rade he must; so he tuk down th' flag, an' marched up th' crick, an' whin he come back, what had he done but tuk some charcoal, an' draw'd a picture av a big orange right in th' middle av th' flag, an' on top av that he come down th' crick singin' 'The Battle av the Roarin' Water.' He looked loike a fool p'radin' all by hisself, an' his singin' was turrible bad, an' altogether ut was more than any man cud stand. We had a grand foight, an' that time Oi licked Mog. So all the afternoon, Oi wor-rked, an' Mog set around an' smoked, the lazy spalpeen!

"The nixt mornin' we divided th' stuff even—the dust an' the grub an' the cartridges, an' everything—an' Mog he strikes out to foind another crick, an' Oi stayed, an' Oi changed th' name av the crick to Kerry Crick. Afther a while me grub run low, an' Oi started out f'r Wiseman, but Oi'd fergot the way, an' after wanderin' around jist wan day ahead av starvation, f'r ut must av been two months, I come to an Injun an' he tuk me down to Caro, on the Chandalar, an' some men was goin' to Fort

Yukon, an' they tuk me to the hospital, where they cut off three av me toes which was in a bad way from freezin'."

Waseche Bill considered. "What would yo' general direction be from Wiseman to this cabin of yo'n, do yo' reckon?"

"'Twould be nartheast, Oi guess, mebbe a hundred miles—mebbe more. Oi don't know. Oi niver got back to Wiseman."

"Prob'ly about right," assented Waseche. "'Specially if you come back onto the Chandalar. Must be ovah towards the east end of the Endicott Range wheah yo' was. Which way did this heah crick of yo'n run?"

"Ut run narth. Ut started jist beyont the big high divide, an' ut run into a bigger river about twinty mile down. An' there's gold on the big river, too. We panned some out on the bars."

Connie, who, with his maps spread out on a table top, had been following every word, looked up. "That creek is somewhere on the north slope of the Endicotts where the rivers flow into the Arctic Ocean. It shouldn't be so hard to find. It's bound to lie east of the Colville—somewhere between the Colville and the east end of the Endicott Range and, according to his map, that isn't more than a couple of hundred miles."

Waseche Bill nodded, and turned to Costello.

"Yo' onderstand that after yo' crossed the main high divide yo' was on the nawthern slope of a mountain range?"

"Yes. Th' cricks an' the rivers run narth."

"Is the' many passes acrost this high divide, do yo' know?"

"Oi know there's two, anyway—the wan we crossed furst, an' the wan at the head av the Kerry Crick an' mebbe there's more. Thim's the only wans I seen."

"Now aftah yo' crossed onto the nawth slope, yo' done some travelin', didn't yo'? Yo' didn't settle on the first crick yo' struck?"

"Yes, we prospected lots av cricks—mebbe a hundred. We worrked east from where we crossed the divide."

"Good. An' the ridges between these cricks—can yo' portage acrost 'em, mostly?"

"Some ye can, an' some ye can't. Some, ye got to folley down till ye come to a fork, an' thin go up the nixt crick."

"An' now, how fah does yo' cabin lay nawth of the main divide?"

"Ut's right clost—not over six or seven mile."

"Can yo' see it from the pass?"

"No, th' crick is twisty, an' the banks is high."

"One thing mo'," said Waseche. "How's the country fo' game?"

"There's plenty av game f'r a man that's a hunter. Nayther Mog nor me is hunters. We kilt some sheep an' some caribous. An' geese an' swans in the lakes where the foothills go down to th' flats. But we didn't have no little rifle, an' we cudn't waste ca'trudes on ptarmigans an' ducks. A man wid a twinty-two cud live loike a king on geese, an' ducks, an' big jack rabbits; an' wid the big rifle he cud git caribous an' sheeps, an' bears; an' wid fish-hooks or nets or spears a man cud git all the fish he nayded f'r hissilf an' his dogs. 'Tis better game country than th' Klondike, f'r there's no hunters except now an' agin' a fambly av Eskimos. Ye can live high if ye like wild things to ate."

"We suah do," laughed Waseche Bill. Then he rose and stretched his arms with a yawn. "I'm goin' to bed. We'll be pullin' out in the mawnin'. We'll try to find out what become of Mog O'Donovan. Keep the commissioner at Fairbanks posted on wheah yo' are, an' we'll hunt yo' up when we come back. An' if we make a strike, yo'll be filed on as good a claim as the' is."

"The saints bless ye!" said the old man.

"An' good luck to ye. An' here's a bit av a chore ye cud do f'r the owld man. Av ye foind the cabin on Kerry Crick, raise up the thurd board in the floor in under the bunk, and fetch me sack of dust, which ut must have tin pound av gold in ut."

"Board!" exclaimed Connie. "Where did you get boards up there? And why didn't you bring the gold out with you when you came?"

"Sure, we split the boards out of spruce wid an ax, an' Oi cudn't fetch the gold because the dogs had died on me, an' Oi had to pack grub whin Oi come out; so Oi had to lave ut behint. An' av ye fetch poor Mog O'Donovan out alive, ye c'n kape the gold! He's the best man that iver stood on two legs—but ye'll tell um ut's *flap-jacks*, won't ye?"

Waseche promised, laughing, and the old man picked up his candle and left the room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sell Joins the Outfit

AFTER the old man had gone, Connie turned to his maps. "What we've got to do is to start out from Wiseman and go up Hammond River way, the same as they did. From there on, it'll just be a question of crossing to the north slope of the Endicotts and exploring each creek as we work east. We can outfit at Wiseman for a whole year, if we want to. From what the old man said, we can just about live off the country."

Waseche nodded. "We can pick up a couple of more dogs an' take two five-dog teams."

"Sure, and outfit the two sleds alike, so if we want to separate to cover more ground, we can do it. There are two portage trails marked here from the Yukon to the upper Koyukuk. A mail trail hits north out of Tanana, crosses the Tozi, and the Melozi, and hits the Koyukuk at Arctic City. The other is the Dall River trail from Fort Hamlin to Coldfoot."

"I reckon we bettah take the mail trail out of Tanana," said Waseche. "Bein' as both Fo't

Hamlin an' Coldfoot is petered out, the Dall Rivah trail prob'ly ain't bein' used this wintah. Of co'se, Arctic City's petered out, too. But the mail fo' all the Koyukuk camps goes in that way, an' them Allakaket Mission folks use that trail, too."

"The going's good on the big river now. If we can get an early start we can make Tanana in two days," said Connie.

Sell, who had been an interested listener, interrupted. "But surely you'll stay at least a couple of days with us here!"

"Now that's right kind an' neighborly, sah, an' we'd like to do it, but heah it is into February, an' we want to be way up on the nawth side of the Endicotts befo' the breakup. Of co'se, it mightn't make no diffe'nce if we stayed, but then, again, a couple of days might make a heap of diffe'nce."

"I won't urge you to stay," said Sell, "because I know a man's foolish to take chances he doesn't have to take. Wish I were going with you. It's the thing I've always wanted to do. I couldn't come up here back in 'ninety-seven or 'ninety-eight because my mother was alive then, and there was no one else to take care of her. Then a few years later I married, and it seemed as though we never could get together enough of

a stake to make the change. Then I got a chance to sell out, and we came." Sell paused, and smiled. "And if it hadn't been for you, I'd have lost everything I had almost as soon as I hit the country. Anyway, I've learned a lesson I won't forget. I suppose I'll settle down and go into business somewhere in Alaska—but it won't be like prospecting."

Waseche Bill cleared his throat. "Well, sah, I know jest how yo' feel. An' I know the' ain't no business goin' to satisfy yo' anyways ontill yo've had a try at prospectin'. If it's in yo' blood, it's in theah. Now, this heah trip ain't no chechahco trip. But we've kind of took a likin' to yo'. I believe yo've got the stuff in yo'—the way yo' followed Squigg up, an' then helt back from beatin' him up when yo' did catch him. Then when yo' wouldn't take the boy's offah fo' the hotel, it showed yo're built from the heart out, which is the way good men is always built. Now, the way me an' Connie feels is about like this: If yo' want to come along, yo' welcome to. Mostly, it's hard work—trailin' in all kinds of weathah, through all kinds of snow—but if yo' health is good, yo'll make it, 'cause we know the tricks of the trail.

"We'll live, mostly, off the country; so the cash outlay won't be much. Yo've got enough of

a stake so yo' can leave the wife plenty to make a livin' with, in case anything happens to yo', which, the chances is, nothin' will. I'll write a note to Dick Colton, an' if anything does happen, he'll see that she gets a livin' out of her money, if she'll invest it wheah he tells her to. Mind, I ain't tellin' yo' this so you'll think it's an extray dangerous ondertakin', 'cause it ain't. Folks has died on trails, 'specially in new country—but not nearly so many as has died in the streets of cities.

“Now, in regards to the money-makin' end of it, of co'se, prospectin' is the biggest kind of a gamble. Sometimes yo' don't strike nothin'. Othah times yo' make wages—that is, about what yo'd made if yo'd stayed around some camp, workin' fo' someone else. Then, again, yo' might make a strike that would be a pretty good thing—an' sometimes yo' might ring the bell! An' that's what keeps men prospectin'—the hope that mebbe to-morrow, or next week, or next yeah, they'll find it like Carmack found it—so yo' could shovel it right out of the grass roots, an' gettin' richer as she goes down!”

Sell rose to his feet, took a turn or two of the room, and paused before the chair of his wife, who had laid aside her mending and sat listening

as Waseche Bill talked. "What do you say, Mother?"

"Why, I say go, of course!" exclaimed the woman. "You'll never get another chance like this. Don't worry about us—we'll get along. I'll run the hotel till spring, then go up to Fairbanks and wait till you come home with a sled-load of gold." And she smiled up at him fearlessly.

"Yo'-all suah belongs up heah in this country, mam," Waseche Bill told her, paying her the highest compliment in his power.

"A sled-load of gold wouldn't be near enough for her," Sell said a little huskily.

"Then we'll have to make it two sled-loads," laughed Connie. "Now, how about turning in?"

"I've got to get busy first and throw my stuff together, if we're going to start early in the morning," said Sell.

Waseche smiled. "Bein' as yo' goin' along, an' yo've got to kind of get things in shape to be gone mebbe a whole yeah, I reckon we'll wait ovah to-morrow. We'll make that one day up, latah."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Camp on the Flats

THE ninety miles of hard-packed trail on the surface of the wind-swept Yukon was made in two days. Several men were loafing about the stove in the store at Tanana as the three prospectors entered. Waseche included the group in a nod of greeting, and inquired of the storekeeper: "How about the trail to the Koyukuk?"

"Mail trail. Hits the river at Arctic City. Four cabins spaced along it. Trail's stake marked almost to the Koyukuk—'propriation run out an' they quit stakin' 'fore they reached the river. Lot of snow lately up on the Tozi and Melozi. Trail's in bad shape. Couple of these parties started out, but they come back."

"You betcher life we come back," supplemented one of the loafers. "We was goin' up to Moses Village but when we run into that loose snow we turned around. Mail man's due a Friday—that's only three days off. Let him break trail."

Connie Morgan's eyes narrowed slightly at the

man's words. He knew the type, despised by the old-timers—the kind that hangs back and lets the other fellow break out the trail.

Waseche Bill was buying supplies for the northward journey. "She's a five-day trail when the going's good," the storekeeper was explaining. "Hundred an' fifty mile, they call it. But take it like it is now, I've know'd it to take fifteen days. Better take on grub to last to Wiseman."

"Hain't you goin' to wait fer the mail man?" asked one of those who had turned back. "Saves time, an' a hull lot of work, lettin' him break trail. That's what mail men's for."

"This one's going to get a surprise," answered Connie. "When we meet him, he will have our trail to come in on."

"Huh," sneered one of the men. "You must like to work. Me—I hain't got no appetite fer buckin' the snow."

Waseche Bill turned from the counter. "If yo'-all's goin' nawth, why not trail along with us? That'll make three sleds, an' with five of us, it won't be no great shakes to break trail."

"Not me," answered the man. "Not when I kin set here an' spit on the stove an' let the mail man do all the trail breakin'."

Waseche checked his supplies, and for an hour the three were busy distributing the outfit

upon the two sleds. When the task was finished they reëntered the store to find that the two loafers had left. The storekeeper grinned. "Guess them two's decided not to wait fer the mail man. They slipped out an' I expect they're right now loadin' their outfit. They'll let you git about a half a day's start, an' foller along in your trail."

"What's their kind aimin' to do on the Koyukuk?" asked Waseche Bill. "Kind of real country fer a couple of skunks like them."

The storekeeper winked. "Hooch fer the Injuns, I guess. That 'ud be about their speed."

"That's the way I had 'em pegged," said Connie, with just the flicker of a grin. "You say the mail man's due Friday?"

"Yes, that's when he's due. I ain't lookin' fer him fer, mebbe, a week, the way the snow is up yonder, an' with the strong cold on, too. She was forty below here on the river this mornin', an' back off the river she runs anywhere from ten to twenty degrees colder. Bob, he's a good man on the trail but the way things is, it 'ud slow up anyone."

"You bet it would," assented the boy. "Anyway he'll find one outfit that isn't afraid to trade trails with him."

The storekeeper followed them to the door. "So long, an' good luck!" he called, as the three

set out. "Wisht they was more of your kind an' less of them others."

The thermometer had risen slightly, and the outfit made good time for the first few miles on the trail of the men who had turned back. But beyond their turning point lay snow that was eighteen or twenty inches deep, necessitating laborious trail breaking.

"We won't make the first mail cabin to-night," concluded Connie, as his eyes swept the flat before them. "We won't try to push beyond that ridge ahead."

Waseche agreed. "If we make the mail cabin by to-morrow night we'll be doin' well," he said. "It'll be plumb dark befo' we make the ridge."

And his prophecy proved correct, for it was nearly four hours later that the outfit began the ascent of the timbered ridge that bounds the south fork of the Tozitna, which, with its sister river, the Melozitna, have become, in the white man's vernacular, the "Tozi," and the "Melozi."

With the coming of darkness, a halt was called in the shelter of the thick spruce. Then it was that Thomas G. Sell got his first real lesson in trail camping. Anyone can camp comfortably almost any place in summer. But only real sourdoughs can, without a moment's discomfort, set up a camp by the light of a couple of candles

thrust into tin cans, in a foot and a half of snow with the thermometer at forty degrees below zero. The candle in the tin can is still Alaska's lantern. It is a makeshift that modern invention has failed to displace. Coal-oil lanterns are worthless, as coal oil congeals at about forty below zero. The electric flashlight, although supposed to function by means of dry cells, freezes at a much higher temperature, and the various gas-generating devices either refuse to function in the strong cold, or are more bother than they are worth. But the lowly candle will burn despite the cold, if properly sheltered from the wind by a discarded tin can.

It was but the work of a few moments to unharness the dogs, and as Connie removed the axe from under the lashings of a sled, he asked Sell to get out the tent and the stove, and joint up the pipe. As the chechahco worked, he noted the smooth efficiency with which the two sourdoughs went about their business. While Waseche Bill scraped away the snow with a snowshoe, Connie felled two green spruce trees and lopped off the branches, which he spread thickly in the space from which the snow had been scraped. Then the trunks of the trees were carried and laid parallel, one on either side of the cleared space, and then the tent was set up, its ridgepole being

merely a rope stretched between two trees. It was guyed to the two spruce logs, and a few blows of the axe deftly shaped two billets of green wood to serve as a base for the stove. While Waseche set up the stove, Connie cut dry wood for the fire and filled the three aluminum pots with snow. A few minutes later a fire was roaring, and while Connie cut and piled spruce boughs for the dogs to bed down on, Waseche and Sell banked the edges of the tent with snow. The bedding was broken out and spread, outer clothing removed and hung up to dry and then, warm and comfortable, the three sat in the little tent, and cooked their supper.

After supper, while the dog food was cooking, Waseche and Connie worked in the fashioning of dog moccasins. "We won't need 'em yet," explained Waseche to Sell's inquiry, "but you nevah can tell when yo' will, an' it's a heap sight bettah to have 'em on hand when yo' do want 'em than to have to lay up a half a day an' make 'em. A dog's about like a man on the trail. Keep his feet in good shape, an' put good grub in his stummick, an' he'll do twict the work, an' do it easier'n what he will if he's poo'ly fed, an' sore-footed."

Sell smiled. "I thought I knew something about trailing when I returned from that trip

after Squigg, but I've learned something new almost every minute since we left Tanana."

Connie Morgan grinned. "And to-morrow you'll learn another trick," he said. "That is, you will if the wind blows like I hope it will. The clouds looked pretty switchy to-night, and generally that means wind."

Waseche Bill eyed the boy questioningly. "What yo' so plumb anxious fo' wind fo'?" he asked. "I ain't honin' fo' no wind. When we get off this high ridge we got a good twenty mile of flats to cross, an' when the cold is down around fo'ty below, a little wind goes a long ways with me. Of co'se, if it comes, it comes, an' a man's got to take it—but I don't see no partic'la use *hopin'* fo' it."

Connie's grin broadened, but he offered no explanation. "Let's roll in," he said. "We want to get a good early start in the morning. And if it's all right with you fellows, I'm going to run this outfit for the next couple of days."

"Go ahead," laughed Waseche. "I don't know what yo' drivin' at but it's all right with me. Staht as early as yo' want to—an' bring on yo' wind!"

When Waseche Bill and Sell awoke, the fire was roaring in the stove, and the tent was warm. From out in the darkness came the sound of an

axe pecking at a dry spruce. Waseche looked at his watch. "He sho' is mighty previous about gettin' up this mawnin'," he said. "It's only fo' o'clock, an' no daylight fo' six hours."

"I wonder what he's figuring on?" speculated Sell.

Waseche shook his head. "Yo' got me. I don't know why he should want wind. When he spoke about an early staht, I thought maybe he aimed to cross the flats in one pull—but, 'sho', he's too trail-wise fo' that, the way the snow is an', besides, if that was his plan he wouldn't be out cuttin' mo' wood. The's enough already fo' to get breakfast, an' one day's supply to carry along fo' to-night's camp on the flats, an' yet, he's cuttin' mo'. We'll just trail along an' play the game his way. He's got some reason fo' what he's doin'—yo' can bet on that."

Breakfast over, the outfit was loaded and three or four days' supply of firewood was added. Waseche Bill eyed the dark sky as the dog teams descended the ridge onto the Tozi flats. "Looks like yo'd get yo' wind, son," he grinned, "an' maybe some snow along with it."

"The more the better," Connie answered, and struck out ahead to break trail.

It was dead calm, and very cold. Steam rose and hovered over the laboring dogs. The first

blush of dawn found the outfit five miles from the ridge with the flats stretching before them, a dead white level of snow that reached unbroken to the horizon. With the dawn came the wind, light and puffy at first, then increasing to a cruelly sharp breeze from the northeast.

Waseche noted that the boy had taken the binoculars from the pack and carried them slung over his shoulder, and that he frequently paused to scan the back trail. Before noon the wind stiffened to a gale, and the heavily overcast sky momentarily threatened snow.

For perhaps the fourth or fifth time, Connie halted and with the binoculars held to his eyes, intently scrutinized the back trail. The others turned to look, too, but in the feeble light of the overcast day nothing was visible save a flat white void of snow. The ridge upon which they had camped was no longer to be seen, and even as they looked the air seemed suddenly to thicken, and when they turned to face the wind, stinging particles seared their faces.

Connie slipped the glass into its case and returned to the sleds. "We'll camp here," he said. "If we move lively, we can get the tent up before the storm gets bad."

Waseche Bill grinned. "We've still two or

three hours of daylight," he suggested, "but yo' the boss, an' if yo' say camp, we camp."

"Yes, we'll camp," replied Connie, returning the grin. "And before we pull out, I think we're going to have some fun."

"Nice place," retorted Waseche facetiously, eyeing the wind-swept flat. "We'd ought to have a lot of fun heah. The's plenty of room to."

"Oh, we'll have neighbors, directly," said Connie. "I think they'll be along about the time we get camp snugged up."

"What do yo' mean? What neighbors are comin'?"

"Why, those two fellows we saw in the store at Tanana. The ones that were waiting for the mail man to break their trail. I've got a hunch they're packing a batch of hooch for Moses Village, and I've got another hunch that I want that hooch worse than the Injuns do."

Waseche Bill laughed, and the three set to work with a will. At the end of an hour the job was done, and they sat down warm and snug in the little tent and brewed a pot of tea.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Hooch Runners

THE early Arctic twilight was settling when in answer to a shout Connie thrust his head out the flap of the tent. "Hello!" he greeted. "So you decided not to wait for the mail man, eh?"

"Naw. Long as you had to break the trail anyways, we figgered we might's well take advantage of it."

"Help yourselves," invited the boy, and withdrew within the tent, where he grinned broadly at his two companions as the man outside stepped close to the flap and continued the conversation in a high-pitched petulant voice:

"But—say! It'll be dark pretty quick. How about givin' us a hand settin' up our tent?"

"Same way you gave us a hand breaking trail," answered Connie from the interior.

Fingers fumbled at the tent flap, and a face was thrust inside. "Hain't no use settin' up two tents, nohow. We kin all crowd in here. We got our own grub."

"You've got your own tent, too. There is no room for you in here."

"'Tain't time to camp nohow. We didn't fetch no tent poles, an' no firewood—only fer one b'ilin' of tea. We figgered on shovin' on till dark, an' then siwashin' it."

"Well, no one's hindering you."

"Ho, you think we're going to break trail, huh? An' then in the mornin' you could foller along. Well, you got another guess comin'. We'll siwash it right here."

"Suit yourself," answered the boy, as the man withdrew, muttering.

When Waseche Bill opened his eyes the following morning, objects within the tent were dimly visible in the faint gray light of dawn. He glanced about in surprise and encountered the face of Connie Morgan smiling at him from about the edges of his robes.

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed the older man. "We-all sho' are payin' fo' our early staht yeste'day mawnin'. Heah it is daylight an' the fiah ain't even lit! We-all sho' overslept ourselves—an' we got a lot o' miles to put behind us on this heah trail."

"There's no hurry," answered Connie. "I've been awake a couple of hours. We're not worrying about miles to-day." And he eyed with satisfaction the big supply of firewood neatly ranked along one side of the tent. "I've got a

hunch that our hooch-running friends will be the ones to do the worrying. We can easily make up what time we lose after we get out of this loose snow country.”

“Anyway, it’s my turn to light the fire,” said Sell, as he wriggled from his bed. “Wow! It’s cold. I bet it’s forty below. And listen to the wind roar—regular gale!”

When the tent warmed up, the three pulled on their heavy clothing and stepped outside. Snow still fell—not a blizzard, but a steady fall of flinty, wind-driven particles that stung like sparks of fire. The dogs of the other outfit were already in harness, and the two men, with parka hoods drawn close, were humped in the lee of their loaded sled. They offered no word of greeting, merely eyeing sullenly the three who had stepped from the tent. “Thirty-eight below,” announced Waseche Bill, consulting the thermometer, and reëntered the tent. Sell collected the dog pans, and Connie tightened a guy rope or two. “Breakfast’s ready!” called Waseche from the interior, and the two joined him.

After breakfast the dogs were fed, and the three lay back on their robes and talked. A half hour passed. Then the two hooch runners appeared at the tent flap.

"Hey, youse," asked one of them, "when you goin' to pull out?"

"Pull out?" asked Connie, in surprise.

"Yes—pull out! When you goin' to hit the trail?"

Connie looked puzzled. "Why, I don't know." He turned to his two partners. "Do you know when we're going to pull out?"

Both shook their heads, and Connie turned to the two in the doorway. "You see, we're prospectors."

"Prospectors! Well, they hain't nothin' to prospect here! Where you headin'?"

"We don't know," answered the boy. "They say 'gold's where you find it.' Maybe we'll find some here."

"What? Out in the middle of this flat! Without no water, an' no wood! You gone crazy, er be you jest so green y'don't know no better?"

The man's partner cut in with a growl: "They ain't none green. Look at this camp. It hain't no chechahco's camp. I know their game. They figger on jest layin' back an' lettin' us break trail."

"Break trail, eh? Well, we don't break no trail! Not with them four dogs, an' the load we got!" The speaker paused and glared at the three seated within the tent. "So if that's what

yer figgerin' on, y' might's well pack up an' git a-goin'."

"Oh, we're in no hurry," grinned Connie. "We're comfortable."

The man who had declared that this was no chechahco camp tried a new tack. He grinned and winked. "Sure, you're comfortable, all right—but we hain't. We are loaded clost to eighty pounds to the dog, an' we can't buck loose snow. An' no more we can't camp here, 'cause we didn't fetch no tent poles an' no firewood. Siwashin' it one night's bad enough, cold's it is. But we've et our cooked grub, an' we got to have fire."

"Hit the back trail to the ridge," suggested Connie.

"They hain't no back trail. It's drifted full."

"Eighty pounds to the dog's awfully heavy for a two-man outfit," suggested the boy.

"Tradin' goods," grunted the man.

"What kind?"

Only for a moment did the man hesitate. "Well—hooch, if you want to know. Two ten-gallon kags of it. What you goin' to do about it?"

"Why, nothing," answered Connie indifferently. "We're not officers."

An awkward silence followed the announce-

ment, during which the three could hear the other man outside, stamping his feet and beating his chest with his arms. Connie replenished the fire, and the man who had been speaking eyed the woodpile. "You got a lot of wood. How about tradin' us some?"

"Trade anything I've got—if the price is right," answered the boy.

"Well, 'course, wood ain't worth nothin'. What'll you take fer the half of what you got?"

Connie grinned. "And then you could camp here as long as we could, and force us to break trail. Guess again."

"You got to break trail, anyways."

"Not a trail that will let you fellows haul hooch in to the Indians. Twenty gallons—forty gallons when you get it cut. That would keep quite a lot of Indians drunk for quite a while, wouldn't it?"

"That any of your business? You goin' to trade us some wood? We can't stand around in the cold all day—we're freezin'."

"We'll trade you all the wood we've got, and the tent poles to boot, for twenty gallons of hooch."

"What!" roared the man. "You'd take everything a man had fer wood to make a fire when he's freezin'?"

"The country would be better off if some men would freeze," said Connie gravely. "But you're not in any danger. Chop up your kegs—they'll burn."

"Go to thunder!"- roared the man. "You think you've got us in a hole—but you hain't!" He turned from the tent and bellowed at his partner: "Hey, you! Quit yer whimperin' and stompin' around an' git busy. Roll that outfit off'n the sled, an' hit back to the ridge fer wood. I'll stay here an' watch the outfit."

"What!" whined the other. "Me—break trail clean back to the ridge an' back here with a load of wood! I couldn't git halfways! I'd git lost, an' if I didn't I'd freeze. I'm most froze now—an' so hungry I'm weak! I told you not to try the Koyukuk! We'd ort to stuck to the Yukon!"

"Shut up! You stay here an' watch the stuff, an' I'll go fer wood! An' if you double-cross me, you'd better travel fast an' travel far—you know me!"

"It'll take you all day an' all night, an' I'll freeze."

"We got to do somethin'!" shouted the other, who was already loosening the lashings of the sled. "Stomp around an' you won't

freeze. I'll hurry. Take the rifle an' shoot anyone that touches them kags!"

Slipping beneath his parka the service revolver that had never left his outfit since he had been a member of the Mounted Police Force, Connie stepped out onto the snow to see the larger of the two men kick the dogs to their feet and swing them into the snow-drifted back trail, while the other stood mumbling beside the outfit that lay in a heap beside the trail.

A half hour passed, and there came a fumbling at the tent flap. "Lemme in," whimpered a voice. "I'm freezin'. He's outa sight, an' I hain't a-goin' to freeze fer no one. I'll trade with you. I'll do anythin' before I'll freeze, an' I'm starvin'."

Connie beckoned him in. "It's rotten to trade hooch to Injuns," he said. "They need all the fur they can trap for grub and blankets and things. You know that as well as I do—but you don't care. You're a miserable, sneaking little skunk—worse than your partner—he's got some nerve, at least. What we ought to do is to take that gun away from you, and smash those kegs, and leave you here to explain things. But I really believe he'd kill you if we did. I suppose it would be a good thing for the country, at that

—but somehow I wouldn't feel quite right about it. So I'll make you a proposition—you can take it, or leave it. You smash those kegs, and we'll agree to pull out and take you with us as far as the first white man's settlement. Your partner won't get back here till to-morrow at the earliest, and the way it's snowing and blowing our trail will be drifted full. He can never overtake us. What do you say?"

"But I gotta eat. I'm starvin'."

"Smash the kegs first, and we'll all eat, and then break camp."

With the odor of the simmering stew in his nostrils, the man hesitated only for an instant; then, stepping outside, he walked to the outfit and picked up an axe. For some moments he stood intently scanning the back trail where the driving snow had swallowed the figure of his hardier partner. Then he rolled a keg from beneath a piece of canvas and chopped at its head until its contents gushed onto the snow at his feet. The second keg followed, and, returning the axe to the outfit, the man followed Connie into the tent, where he seated himself close to the stove and wolfed down three liberal helpings of stew.

The meal over, the man fidgeted nervously. "Let's git goin'," he suggested. "If Blackie

ketches me after choppin' up them kags, I'm a goner!"

"He can't overtake us," Connie said. "By the time he gets to the ridge, cuts his wood, and gets back, we'll be a long way on the trail. Our dogs are fresh and his will be pretty tired from their trip. We'll break camp now, and travel till we hit the next ridge. It's nearly noon and we haven't much daylight left, but we can follow this staked trail just about as well in the dark."

In breaking camp, the new man was a willing helper, his one object being to place as many miles as possible between himself and his absent partner. As the outfit stood ready for the trail, Connie noted that the man carried the rifle the other had handed him to guard the kegs with. "Is there another rifle with his outfit?" he asked.

"Naw, we only had one, but I'm goin' to take that. I hain't goin' to have him sneakin' up an' takin' no shot at me."

"Leave the gun," ordered the boy. "He may need it to get meat with. You wouldn't leave a man without a gun in this country, would you?"

"Sure, I would—him! I don't care nothin' about him. I'm figgerin' on savin' my own hide."

"You're a fine specimen," said the boy. "You

put that rifle back! I happen to be running this outfit, and I'm willing to take a chance on your hide." And all through the short afternoon, Connie and Waseche and Sell grinned at each other as they noted the zeal with which the miserable scoundrel broke trail far in advance of the outfit.

It was past midnight when the four camped on the ridge between the Tozi and the Melozi. Camp was made in the shelter of timber, and the scared man took deep comfort from the fact that the trail had drifted full behind them almost as soon as it was made.

Two days later they met the mail carrier, and the following day they passed through Moses Village, and that night camped at the Allakaket Mission. Soon after leaving the Mission the scared man hired out to a party that was about to start for the Kobuk country.

The journey up the Koyukuk was uneventful enough. The going was good, and each night they were able to camp in a deserted cabin of a prospector, or in one of the deserted "towns" that had sprung up, flourished for a short time, and died when the Koyukuk boom petered out. Bettles, Arctic City, Peavey, Tramway Bar, Coldfoot—all builded on high hope of vast riches—are only names now, names and decaying cabins.

Of all the Koyukuk diggings only Nolan, Wiseman, and Hammond River are still going camps, and very soon these, too, will be nothing but names.

One week later they pulled into Wiseman, and proceeded to outfit for their journey into the unknown. For beyond Wiseman lies the Endicott Range—and beyond the Endicott Range, somewhere, was Kerry Creek, with a faded green flag flapping dejectedly at a pole and, if the old Irishman's story were true, much free gold waiting in the sands of the creek bed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Miners' Meetin'

IF THERE really was gold on far-north Kerry Creek, as crippled old Costello had insisted, those three would find it. And if Costello's hot-headed old partner, O'Donovan, was still up in that country, they would find him.

Meanwhile, after their bleak journey up the Koyukuk, the hospitality of the mining camp was welcome.

The Koyukuk mining camps, north of the Yukon in interior Alaska, are the most inaccessible camps in Alaska. But the very remoteness of the miners from the rest of the world brings them closer together. And as the Koyukuk camps are the most clannish, so are they the most hospitable camps in all that North country.

So it was that Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill and Sell received hearty welcome in Wiseman, though personally unknown to anyone in the camp; and so they heard in the roadhouse, around the big stove of evenings, the luck of different men discussed.

"Evah heah of a man named O'Donovan?" asked Waseche Bill the evening of their third day at the camp.

"He was here quite a spell back," remembered a man. "With his pardner. They didn't stay long. They shoved on into the mountains, north."

"That's so," seconded the storekeeper. "An' then, later, he come back fer more supplies. He didn't have much to say, an' I don't guess they done much good fer theirselves. Guess they ain't in the country no more. Prob'ly went out to the coast."

"Er mebbe they didn't get out," foreboded a solemn-faced man. "That there country north of the mountains is plenty bad. I'm doubtin' they's gold over there, an' if they is, it kin stay there fer all of me. Chances is, them Irish is dead."

"No, one of 'em ain't," answered Waseche. "Costello, his name is, an' he come out by way of the Chandalar. He's down to Kaitok Landin', crippled up with rheumatism, an' kind of touched in the head. He an' his pardner, O'Donovan, was like brothers together, but they got on the peck, an' separated, an' Costello managed to get out, but he's never heard anything from O'Donovan since."

"Chances is, he never will—no one else, neither," opined the doleful man. "I——"

"You claim you don't believe there's gold north of the mountains," interrupted a man with a blond mustache. "How about Burr MacShane? He found gold north of the mountains."

"Yes," assented another, "but they ain't but blame few Burr MacShanes! He'd find it where most men would freeze to death an' starve." The speaker turned to Waseche Bill. "You was askin' about O'Donovan. Friend of yours?"

"No," answered Waseche, "but I promised his pardner I'd keep an eye out fo' him."

"Yo' ain't figgerin' on hittin' north acrost the mountains, be you?"

"Yes, we-all 'lowed we'd sashay ovah that way."

"Well, gold's where you find it, an' I s'pose it might's well be there as anywheres. But I'm like Jed, here. I figger if it's there, it kin stay there! You're welcome to stay on the Koyukuk. They's a lot of cricks that ain't be'n scratched yet."

"We got a notion we'd like to hit off into new country, somehow," answered Waseche. "And when a man's got an itch in his foot, the' ain't nothin' but the trail that'll cure it."

"Ain't it the truth!" exclaimed an older man.

"An' yet the trail don't never cure. The best it'll do is to ease up the itch—an' pretty soon it's back itcher'n ever. But, at that, back there behind them mountains, that's bad country—I'd say too blamed bad fer a boy." And his glance went to Connie.

Just then the door opened and a man stepped abruptly into the room. All eyes centered on him as he loosened his ice-encrusted muffler and threw back the hood of his parka. His glance, traveling rapidly from face to face, came back to concentrate upon Connie and Waseche Bill and Sell.

"Where's my pardner?" he snarled at them. "Where's Jud Haines?"

Connie Morgan smiled into the irate face. "Lost someone?" he asked.

"You know who I've lost!" Abruptly the man turned to the interested spectators. "How many was in this outfit when they hit camp?" he demanded.

"Jest them three," answered the proprietor of the roadhouse.

"An' they ort to be four! My pardner was with 'em! An' where is he now? Robbed an' murdered—that's where he is! Layin' froze stiff under the snow somewheres betwixt here an' Allakaket!"

Men's faces swiftly sobered. Their eyes shifted inquiringly from the speaker to the three who sat smiling into the scowling face of their accuser.

"Oh, you kin laugh!" shouted the newcomer. "But you can't laugh off no murder—not in this country, you can't!" He turned to the others. "Am I right or wrong?"

Big Brock Mantell, a youngish man with a lean, determined jaw and piercing gray eyes, spoke up. "You've spilled some pretty heavy talk, stranger. Accusin' folks of murder without you can prove it ain't a healthy pastime in this camp."

"I kin prove it! Where is Jud if he ain't——"

"Hold on," interrupted Brock. "Just because your pardner ain't here don't give you no license to claim these men murdered him. S'pose we do the job all fair an' regular. How about it, boys? I think this case calls for a miners' meetin'."

"You bet!"

"Call a meetin'."

"Miners' meetin's right!"

Assent was unanimous, and Brock rose and drew on his coat and cap. "Couple of you boys come with me an' notify the camp," he said, "an' while we're gone, don't nobody let a ybody leave the room."

The door closed behind the three, and profound silence followed their departure.

Presently men began to drift in. Singly, and by twos and threes they came, and finally when Brock Mantell and his two helpers returned, it was to find in the room all the able-bodied men in camp ranged in rows along the wall and seated in whispering groups upon the floor. For, in the far-flung camps, miners' meeting takes the place of a court of law. The accused is the counsel for the defense, and the accuser is the prosecuting attorney. There is no judge, and the whole camp is the jury. Generally some man is selected as presiding officer, and he questions both accused and accuser, although anyone present may ask a question. The final decision is the will of the meeting expressed by a majority vote. And justice is generally done, for these men are serious men whose code is builded upon honesty and fair play.

As the last three entered the room, a bearded man lifted his voice. "I move we elect Brock Mantell presidin' officer of this here miners' meetin'. Them in favor say 'yes.'"

There was vociferous assent, and Brock stepped around behind the rough desk in one corner.

"All right, men. I accept. The meetin's called." He motioned to Waseche Bill, Connie, and Sell. "You three bring your chairs up here in front of me. Set 'em sideways in a row. An' you—" he beckoned to the man who had made the accusation—"you set your chair there to one side, facin' them three."

When all had arranged themselves, Brock addressed the crowd. "These three men here pulled in three days ago, an' they've been stoppin' here since. This one opposite 'em come in to-night, an' starts right in claimin' these others murdered his pardner somewheres along the trail. Murder's a serious thing, men. It's up to us to listen mighty carefully to what these folks has got to say, an' act accordin'. If we find 'em guilty, it's our duty to string 'em up. If they ain't, they've got the right to stay amongst us, or travel where they please, without no one trailin' 'em up, claimin' they're murderers. Now, I'll start by askin' these folks their names, an' where they come from."

"William Antrim, mostly called Waseche Bill. Ten Bow, Alaska."

"Connie Morgan. Ten Bow, Alaska."

"Thomas G. Sell, Kaitok Landing, Alaska."

"An' youn?" asked Brock.

"Why, John Smith, er—Iditarod City."

Brock Mantell proceeded. "You all heard what these folks claimed their names is, an' where they came from——"

"They usta be a kid name of Morgan over Dawson way," interrupted a man. "Usta be in the Mounted. They claimed he was Sam Morgan's boy. Is he him?"

Connie nodded. "I served in the Mounted Police. My father was Sam Morgan."

The man whispered to those near him, and necks were craned for a better view of the boy.

"This here John Smith," called a voice. "I'd like to ask him when he was down to Iditarod City, did he ever meet up with Blackie Stone?"

The man turned quickly in his chair, his eyes searching for the speaker. "Naw," he growled, "I never did."

"Guess that's right," admitted the questioner, a man with a straw-colored mustache. "A man can't hardly be comin' and goin' at the same time. Shake hands with yerself, old-timer. It's time you two met."

"What's the idee?" demanded Smith, turning to Brock Mantell. "What's he jumpin' onto me fer? Anyone'd think it was me murdered my pardner instead of them——"

"You shut up!" order Brock. "You'll have your say when the time comes. An' we're the

ones to decide who done the murderin'." He paused. "Any more questions, Sam?" he asked the man with the mustache.

"Not any right now. Let's hear what he's got to say first."

"All right. John Smith, stand up an' speak out so we all can hear. An' mind you stick to the truth."

The man rose. "Course I didn't see 'em kill him," he began. "What I say is: If they didn't kill him, where is he? He was with 'em——"

"Hold on," interrupted Brock. "Start in at the beginnin'. How come your pardner was with them, instead of with you?"

"It's like this: Me an' Jud Haines, we gits together a small tradin' stock an' figgers to trail up from Tanana to Moses Village. Well, we hits them big flats 'tween the Tozi an' the Melozi; an' it come on to snow fierce, an' we couldn't make it acrost. We hadn't fetched no tent poles, an' only firewood fer a bilin' of tea, account we figgered on makin' them flats in one pull.

"Right in the middle of the flats we come onto these here three hombres campin'. Tent all up, supper cookin', an' plenty firewood piled inside. It was comin' on dark an' we asked 'em would they help us make camp. They wouldn't. An' we asked could we sleep in their tent, which they

was plenty of room in it, an' they wouldn't let us. The kid, there, he seems to be the boss of the outfit. Leastways, he done all the talkin'.

"So we had to siwash it—forty below, an' snowin' an' the wind blowin' forty mile an hour—an' them snug in their tent. Next mornin' we waited around fer them to pull out, figgerin' to have their trail, but they didn't pull out. They claimed they was goin' to prospect them flats. We tried to trade fer a few sticks of firewood, so we could cook us a meal. But they wanted our hull tradin' stock fer a little firewood! Yes, sir, men! There they was with a-plenty, an' us starvin' an' freezin', an' they wanted to gouge us fer all we had.

"Well, I wouldn't stand fer it! No, sir. So I left Jud to watch the outfit, an' I took the dogs an' hit back to the timber fer wood. It took me till the next noon to git back. Well, when I got there, my pardner was gone, an' they was gone.

"What I figures is this: Jud, he was cold an' hungry an' those birds got him to go 'long of them an' when they git him past the Mission they rob him an' slip him in under the snow. I an' the dogs was too plumb wore out to foller; so I camped till next mornin'. But the goin' bein' so bad, I never ketched up with 'em. I met the mail carrier, howsomever, an' he'd met

the four of 'em three days ahead of me. They was together yet at the Injun village, an' when they passed the Allakaket Mission. I follered along until to-night I hits this camp. An' here's the three, but Jud Haines, he hain't here—an' where is he, if he hain't murdered? They hain't nothin' but dead camps betwixt here an' the Mission. If he hain't layin' stiff in under the snow, where is he?" The man glared about him.

Sell, his eyes on the listeners, saw that most wore grave faces, though behind a straw-colored mustache one man grinned.

Brock Mantell broke the silence. "You've heard what this man said. But don't form no opinions till you've heard the other side. Remember there ain't nothin' been said to prove that this here Jud Haines ain't alive an' kickin' somewhere." He turned to the three accused. "What you got to say for yourselves?"

As Connie Morgan stood up, smiling, he noted that most of the faces before him were unfriendly, if not actually hostile. But his smile never wavered as he began. "I listened closely to what Blackie——"

"Blackie!" snapped the man, half rising. "Whad ye mean—Blackie? My name's John Smith."

"Of course, I don't know," answered Connie.

"Your partner Haines was with us for more than a week, and he always spoke of you as Blackie."

"It's a lie!" shouted the other, and as Brock silenced him, the man with the straw-colored mustache chuckled.

Connie continued: "As I was saying, I listened to what this man had to say, and as far as I know, he told the truth." The boy paused and noted the surprise on the faces about him. "Yes," he continued, "and he made a good guess as to what happened while he was gone for the firewood. We didn't kidnap his partner, though. Haines made a bargain with us. He was hungry and cold, and we had plenty to eat, and a fire."

Again Connie paused, and the scowls of his listeners deepened. Here was a boy blandly admitting that he had taken advantage of the necessities of a man on the trail.

"As I said, I believe this man has told the truth. But he didn't tell all the truth. He left out some things that seem to me important. You may judge for yourselves.

"My partner, Waseche Bill, and I went broke on a big proposition on Ten Bow. We decided to hit out on a prospecting trip. At Kaitok Landing, Sell decided to throw in with us. We went up to Tanana and outfitted for the upper Koyukuk. At Tanana we found these two men waiting for

the mail man to break trail for them. They wanted us to wait, too—but we told 'em that wasn't our style, and we'd trade trails with the mail man, and asked them to trail along with us, as five men with three teams could easily break trail.

“But they wouldn't do it—said they'd sit back and spit on the stove till the mail man broke the trail. When they saw we intended to strike out, they got their own outfit together and trailed in behind, using our trail instead of waiting for the mail carrier. We suspected what their trading stock was—hooch for the Injuns of Moses Village. You men know what that means—especially at the tail end of a long winter. We determined not to let them reach the village with the hooch. So, figuring that they were counting on our trail, we camped in the middle of the Tozi flats in some pretty rough weather.

“They came along, and things happened just about as this man told you. He had hardly got out of sight on his trip for firewood when his partner came to us and offered to trade all the hooch for food and shelter, provided we'd take him along so Blackie wouldn't find him when he returned. He said he'd be killed sure if Blackie ever caught him.

“So we agreed to take him along with us to a

white man's camp if he'd destroy the hooch; so he drove in the heads of the kegs, and spilled the liquor. Then we broke camp and hit the trail.

"We met the mail carrier a few days later, and passed through Moses Village and Allakaket Mission. Between the Mission and this camp Jud Haines got a job. And we three came on. That, I guess, is all we have to tell."

John Smith leaned forward, glaring. "What if it was hooch we had to trade? That don't give you no license to kill Jud Haines! Where's a man goin' to git a job betwixt here an' the Mission?"

"Hold on, there," interrupted Brock Mantell. "Just wait. I'm runnin' this meetin', an' it's your turn to shut up!" He turned to Connie, and as he spoke, Sell noticed that grins of approval had supplanted the scowls on many faces. "Far as I can see, you done a good job in keepin' that hooch away from the Injuns. But that ain't exactly what this here meetin' was called to look into. This man claims you robbed and murdered his partner. That's what we want to find out about. You ain't give no satisfactory account of where he's at. Just sayin' he got a job between here an' the Mission is kind of vague. It looks like it was up to you to do a little more explainin'."

Connie looked his questioner in the eye. "Jud Haines was certain that Blackie, as he called him, would kill him when he found out he'd smashed those kegs. Haines is a man who hasn't much nerve, and all he thought of was to put as many miles as he could between himself and Blackie. I told you the truth when I said he got a job. We promised him we wouldn't tell anyone where he is—and we won't."

CHAPTER TWENTY

On Trial

As BROCK MANTELL hesitated, John Smith rose, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. "Guess it's my turn to talk, now. I got somethin' to say, which I helt it back till he'd spoke his piece."

"Well, spit it out," ordered Mantell, and the miners crowded closer.

"Why I claim Jud was murdered an' robbed, is because he had our money—somewheres between twenty-seven hundred an' three thousan', in bills. I'm bettin' Jud he drawed his roll, figgerin' to pay 'em fer grub an' wood, an' they seen it—an' that was the last of pore Jud. Search these hombres an' see if you don't find them bills! Then see if you believe this here lie about Jud's gittin' a job—in a country where they hain't no jobs to git!"

"Fair enough!" shouted someone. "Let's search 'em!"

"Search 'em's right!"

"Sounds reasonable."

Brock Mantell turned to the accused. "All we want, of course, is to get the straight of this thing. You got any objection to bein' searched?"

Waseche Bill rose. "Yes," he answered, "we have. The' ain't none of us evah been searched, an' we don't aim to be. But we ain't got no objection whatevah to layin' evahthing we got on us on this desk—even the bills this heah fellow spoke about."

And amid exclamations of surprise, Waseche Bill proceeded to empty his pockets, laying the various articles upon the desk. As he added an oilskin packet to the pile, he said: "The bills is in theah. Yo' bettah count 'em, an' when my pardners has laid out the rest, I reckon yo'll find the's jest about the amount of money he named."

Very deliberately, Brock Mantell picked up the packet, removed the waterproof covering, and amid breathless silence counted the bills. "Nine hundred and fifty dollars," he announced. "Does this mean that you admit robbin' this here Jud Haines?"

Waseche Bill smiled. "Do we-all look like robbahs?" he drawled.

"It ain't what a man looks like that counts, old-timer," cried someone. "It's what he is!"

"I thought it was funny they was so all-fired

anxious to get off into the mountains!" added another.

"'Cause a man's got money on him, ain't no sign he stoled it," argued another.

"But the kid claimed they was broke!"

Brock Mantell rapped on the desk, and the voices subsided. He motioned for Connie and Sell, who ranged themselves beside Waseche Bill. "Let's see your money," he said, and when the packets were laid before him, the man carefully counted the bills. "Nine-fifty apiece," he announced. "You got anything to say?"

Connie Morgan spoke up. "Yes. In the first place, when I said we went broke I didn't mean that we were flat busted. We've still got a few thousand in the bank at Fairbanks—nothing to what we did have, but at least enough for a grubstake. I've been trying to figure how Blackie knew the size of our pile, and I think I know the answer. When we left Fairbanks, Waseche drew out a couple of thousand, and he had that. At Kaitok Landing, when Sell threw in with us, he handed Waseche a thousand. When we got to Tanana and outfitted, Waseche paid for the stuff and then for safety's sake, divided the balance of the money equally among us. This was in the store, and Blackie and his partner were there, and probably took in everything."

"Huh, that story sounds fishy to me!" cried a voice.

"I believe the kid!" spoke up a man. "Over in the Yukon he rates up high. I was there, and I know."

"I know'd Sam Morgan," said another. "He was some man!"

"'Tain't no sign his kid couldn't go bad."

"Chances is, he wouldn't."

"Looks like he did, though!" cried another.

"If they didn't kill Haines, where is he?" demanded a voice.

Again Brock Mantell rapped for order. He surveyed the three standing before him. "I ain't sayin' you're guilty, or ain't guilty. But things look sort of bad. Looks like the only way you can come clean is to tell where this here Jud Haines is. Will you tell?"

"No," answered Connie.

Waseche Bill merely shook his head.

"Nothing doing," snapped Sell.

The man with a straw-colored mustache shouldered forward. "Jest a minute," he said. "Brock, kin I ask this accusin' hombre a question?"

"Go as far as you like, Sam. This is serious business. We've got to get to the bottom of it."

Sam shot his question. "Blackie, how long does it take a man to walk from Flat City to

Iditarod with his hands tied behind him, an' a sign hangin' on his back sayin' how he was kicked out of camp fer stealin'?"

Smith's face went livid with rage. "What do you mean?" he snarled. "I never been to Flat City!"

"You're a liar!"

"An' my name ain't Blackie—it's John Smith! An' what is all this got to do with killin' Jud Haines?"

"Maybe your name's John Smith, now—but a few years back it was Blackie Stone. You was set on the long traverse out of Flat City, by verdict of a miners' meetin', fer stealin' gold out of riffles."

"You lie!"

"Hold on!" interrupted Brock Mantell. "This ain't getting us nowheres. Now, takin' Matt Wanish's word about this kid's reputation over in the Yukon country, an' takin' Sam's word for this other hombre's reputation down Iditarod way, I'd suggest we better not do nothin' we can't undo till we've had a chance to talk to the storekeeper in Tanana. If these three had that money there, then it's a cinch they never stole it off'n Haines. If these reputations was reversed, I'd say go ahead an' string 'em up, 'cause the evidence is agin 'em. I ain't sayin'

they ain't guilty 'cause good men can go bad,
but I say let's go slow——”

The door opened, letting in a blast of icy air,
and all eyes turned to a newcomer, who stood
blinking at the assembly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Blackie Stone

"BURR MACSHANE!" cried someone, and instantly the man was surrounded by a welcoming crowd.

"What's all the excitement?" laughed the man, as he removed his outer garments. "Holdin' the annual election? Don't I get a vote?"

"I'll say you get a vote!" cried Mantell, beckoning to him. "Only it ain't an election. It's a miners' meetin' called because a man has accused three others of robbin' his pardner and murderin' him."

The crowd divided to let MacShane pass to the desk—Burr MacShane, known the length and breadth of Alaska as one of the best men in the North.

MacShane paused, his eyes on the man who had called himself John Smith. "Oh, it's you, is it? So they've got you at last?"

Brock Mantell grinned. "You've took the wrong fork of the trail, Burr. It's his pardner

he claims was murdered. These others is the ones he claims done it—an' things looks kind of bad for 'em."

MacShane glanced for the first time at the three who stood beside their chairs. Then his hands shot out in greeting. "Hello, Waseche! Hello, Connie Morgan! What in thunder are you two doin' way up here? Ten Bow got too tame for you? Well, loosen up an' give us the particulars. I'd sure be delighted to hear the details of the passin' of any of Blackie Stone's pardners."

Waseche Bill laughed. "I'm afraid we can't accommodate you, Burr. Last we seen of him he was alive an' kickin'."

"Now, that's too bad! Waseche, you're gettin' plumb careless about who you let live!"

A roar of laughter greeted the words. The coming of Burr MacShane had relieved the tension—changed the whole aspect of a grave situation. If these men were friends of Burr MacShane, their status upon the Koyukuk was unshakable. And the relief of the men of Wiseman at finding grim responsibility removed from their shoulders sought expression in talk and loud laughter.

Blackie Stone knew his scheme had failed. "I ain't never got no square deal," he raged.

MacShane agreed with him. "That's the truth, Blackie. If you'd had a square deal, you'd be in jail right now. Remember, Blackie, there's still some of us left in the country that's got a pretty good idea what happened on Tiger."

The man flinched visibly. Silently he shrank into his chair as Burr MacShane turned to Waseche Bill. "Who was you supposed to have murdered?" MacShane asked.

"Fellow name of Jud Haines. They was runnin' hooch to Moses Village."

"Too bad you fell down on the job," grinned MacShane. "Ought to have made it a duet, too," he added with a glance toward the cowering Blackie. "But you ain't told me what you're doin' up here."

"We're prospectin'. We went bust on Ten Blow——"

"Went bust!" MacShane fairly shouted. "You mean some outfit got to buckin' you? Well, fight 'em—fight 'em to a finish! You can have everything I've got——"

Waseche interrupted him with a grin. "If yo've got a jack that'll raise up a mountain an let our crick out, we'd be obliged fo' the loan of it. Yo' see, we sunk everything we had into Big Buck, an' along come an earthquake an' shuck the foundation out from undah a mountain, an'

she settled right down in the middle of our crick, an' left us bone dry."

"An' there's nothin' you can do?"

"Sho' there is. We're doin' it now—hittin' out to hunt us up a new crick."

"But ain't there any way you can get back your water?"

"Well, she's a right husky mountain, an' she looks plumb satisfied to set right where she's at." Waseche Bill grinned resignedly. Then, seeing the interest in the faces about him, he told in humorous detail how the geologists had investigated and reported the hopelessness of the situation.

The miners crowded close, listening and laughing, until Waseche had finished his semi-serious account. Then Brock Mantell suddenly remembered the occasion that had called them together, and rapped loudly for order.

"This is a miners' meetin'," he reminded them, "an' it's fittin' that we get our business over. You've heard what's be'n said on both sides. All them which believes these three men robbed an' murdered Jud Haines will signify by sayin' 'Aye.'"

Silence.

"Contrary, 'No.'"

A vociferous roar filled the room. During it,

Blackie Stone attempted to slip away unobserved, but the man with the straw-colored mustache shoved him roughly back to his place and turned to the crowd with:

"How about this skunk that tried to lie these men into a noose? This here meeting ought to tend to his case. I know what he done down Iditarod way, an' Burr's know'd him longer'n what I have. What I claim is, if anyone ever needed hangin', he does!"

All eyes centered on the cringing man. Brock Mantell noted the hardening of the eyes, and decided to shift the responsibility. He cleared his throat.

"You've all heard what Sam has to say. Of course, we want to keep cool-headed, an' not make no mistakes. Personally, howsomever, I ain't got much time for a man that'll try to lie others into a noose. But I'm goin' to pass the buck to a better man. You all know Burr MacShane. I'm turnin' this meetin' over to him."

Amid expressions of assent, MacShane stepped to the desk. For an instant his eyes met the terrified eyes of Blackie Stone. Stone's glance wavered, and with a moan he buried his face in his hands.

Then MacShane was speaking. "Boys," he

began, "for twenty-odd years, off an' on, I've know'd Blackie Stone. He's done about everything, first an' last, that a man hadn't ought to do. An' there's some of us that has a mighty good idea that if he had what was comin' to him, he would not be here now. Well, thinkin' over what we'd ought to do with him has brought to my mind something that happened a long time ago, and I'd like to tell the story.

"Me an' Ben Caldwell was camped one spring night on a bend of the Forty Mile. We'd shoved our boat into the mouth of a little crick and camped. The big river had jest let go, an' the lower stretches of Forty Mile was clear of ice, but runnin' bank full. Big, black clouds was gatherin' an' we'd hardly hustled the tent up before the storm hit. Rain in bucketfuls, lightnin' an' thunder, an' more rain—an' then, all of a sudden, the crick raised about four foot in one jump! An' she ran full of floatin' ice. What had happened was a big jam above us had let go an' all the ice was tearin' down to the big river. After that first big jump, the crick quit raisin' an' we stood watchin' the ice rush past.

"The lightnin' flashes come so fast there wasn't hardly no darkness between an' the thunder was jest one long roar. Suddenly Ben grabs my arm

an' points upstream, an' there, millin' around in them ice cakes, was a polin' boat with two men in it. They was workin' their poles—but shucks! They might's well had straws. The way the big cakes was rarin' up an' crashin' around 'em, I expected every second to see the boat smashed to kindlin's.

“Well, Ben dives for a coil of line. One of 'em caught it an' made it fast, an' me an' Ben headed for a scrub tree to snub her to. But we couldn't quite make it—the line fell jest short. Then she tightened, an' we begun to drag. We'd get heel-holts an' rare back, but the boat was jest a few pounds too heavy. If we could have held, she'd have worked to shore through the cakes, but we couldn't. We was being dragged to the mouth of the crick, an' once there we'd have to let go or be dragged into the water. In two minutes, we'd have to turn 'em loose.

“Then the man in the stern stood up on the tarp that covered the outfit. The other, with his eyes glued on that line, didn't see him—but we did. He took in the situation, an' then he grinned—yes, boys—he grinned! Plain as day his face was in the bright glare of the lightnin' flashes! It's a face I've never forgot. Well, he waved his hand an' stepped off! Stepped off cool an' casual,

as though he was steppin' ashore—but he didn't step ashore. Boys, he stepped right in amongst them ice cakes.

"An' with his weight gone, our heel-holts held! Slowly the boat worked ashore. The bow man jumped to the bank an' looked around for his pardner. It was the first he'd know'd he was gone. 'He fell out!' he yelled. But we told him how it was." MacShane paused, as though living again those tense moments.

There was no sound in the room and only Connie Morgan, whose glance had drifted to the face of Blackie Stone, saw that the man's jaw had dropped, and that his eyes were fixed upon the face of Burr MacShane.

MacShane continued: "An' what do you think he said—this man whose pardner had stepped off into a freezin' death so the boat could make shore? He said: 'It's a bad wind that don't blow nobody any good—now, the whole outfit belongs to me!'

"Well, me an' Ben wanted to send him after his pardner, but we let him live." MacShane's eyes rested for a moment upon the staring eyes of Blackie Stone; then he continued: "The next time I saw Blackie Stone was in Dawson. He'd just been kicked out of camp for robbin' a cache. From that time on our trails have touched

from time to time, an' I'm tellin' you his record ain't be'n good——"

"You bet it ain't!" interrupted the man with the straw-colored mustache.

MacShane silenced him. "There's no denyin' that a man must be judged by his acts!"

"String him up!" cried someone, and the crowd surged uproariously forward. MacShane stepped before the cowering Stone, and finally succeeded in restoring a semblance of order.

"A man ort to be hung that would say a thing like that after what his pardner done!" cried someone.

"You bet he had!"

"He'd ort to been hung long ago!"

"His pardner was some man!"

MacShane raised his hand. "You said it!" he thundered. "His pardner was some man! Boys—I never knew what became of the man who stepped *ashore*! The man that stepped out into the river sits right here. His name is Blackie Stone!"

Profound silence greeted the unexpected announcement. Men stared, wide-eyed, from MacShane to the man in the chair, whose face was now covered by his two hands.

MacShane spoke again: "Boys, we don't know why this man went bad. Maybe he don't

know. But I do know that on that stormy night, years ago, he done a thing any man may be proud to have done. I know Blackie Stone has never known that I was one of the two men who pulled on that rope that night. But I never forgot him. Boys, if the law goes back an' digs up something a man has done years back, an' tries him for it, an' convicts him, ain't it jest as fair we should go back an' dig up something that stands in a man's favor—an' give him credit for it? I think so."

Connie Morgan stepped swiftly to the side of Blackie Stone. "So do I!" he exclaimed. "It's just as Burr said, we don't know why this man went bad. Maybe under stress of circumstances he committed a theft or a robbery. Circumstances can get mighty hard. Anyhow, Blackie Stone got a bad name, and wherever he went he was branded as a crook, so he kept on being a crook. But there isn't a man here but knows that it took a good man to do what this man did that stormy spring night. So when Blackie Stone went bad, a good man went bad. But it's never too late for a good man to start over. Waseche and I are starting over to build up our pile. Why not give this man a chance to start over and build up his reputation? If there's a doubt in our minds that he'll do it, let's give him the bene-

fit of the doubt. The wrong he's on trial here for was committed against me and my partners, and I know they'll agree with me when I say, Let's forget it. Let's think of Blackie Stone, not as a hooch-runner, not as a cache-robber, but as the man who stepped into the river so his partner could get ashore.

"If Burr doesn't mind, I'll just put it this way. All in favor of giving Blackie Stone a clean slate to start out with signify by saying 'Aye.'"

The men had listened attentively. The idea caught their fancy. And a unanimous chorus of "ayes" filled the room.

Slowly, Blackie Stone stood up and stood staring into the faces of Connie Morgan and Burr MacShane. He moistened his lips with his tongue, seemed about to speak, and then, as if the effort was beyond him, turned abruptly toward the door, and walked slowly through the lane that opened for him.

Midway of the room the man with the straw-colored mustache barred his way, and stuck out his hand. "Hello, old-timer!" he greeted him heartily. "Put 'er there! An' say—jest come along an' we'll throw yer stuff in my cabin, an' when this spell of weather lets up, the boys'll turn in an' help ye roll up one of yer own."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Cabin on Kerry Creek

A MONTH later, many miles from Wiseman, the three partners topped a sharp divide between two creeks and came abruptly upon a tiny snow-covered cabin.

"Kerry Creek!" cried Connie, and pointed to a pole from the top of which drooped a patch of dark green cloth.

"Reckon yo're right, son," agreed Waseche Bill. "An' O'Donovan ain't wintered heah. That's a whole winter's driftin' up agin that do'."

The dogs were unharnessed and while Connie and Sell cleared the snow from the entrance, Waseche cut firewood. Soon Connie could shove the door open, and he peered into the black interior of the windowless hut. Taking a match and a bit of candle from his pocket, he struck a light.

"Why, there's grub here on the shelves!" he exclaimed. "Quite a bit of it. Costello said he'd run out of grub!"

While Sell kindled a fire in the little stove,

Connie and Waseche took stock. "A month's grub fo' a one-man outfit," estimated Waseche. "Costello must have be'n touched in the head befo' he left this crick."

"Or else O'Donovan came back after he had gone, and left this stuff here for him," suggested Connie.

"That's maybe what happened," agreed Waseche, "an' if it is, he's prob'ly left a lettah, or somethin'. We'll get suppah stahted, an' then we'll look careful."

While the stew simmered and Waseche mixed bannocks, Connie dropped to the floor and wriggled under the bunk. "If O'Donovan left any word for Costello, he'd probably leave it in the gold cache. Here's a loose board. Hand me something to pry it up with."

Sell handed him a belt axe, and a moment later the boy called out: "It's here! At least, there's a can with something in it that's heavy enough for gold."

Wriggling out, he placed the can upon the table, where the three crowded about it. The lid was removed, and Connie lifted out a folded paper. "Here's a letter," he cried, "and—yes, —it's gold, all right!" He reached into the can and let the yellow grains run through his fingers. "Maybe a hundred and fifty ounces."

"What does the lettah say?" asked Waseche, and holding it close to the candle, the boy read:

"Dear Mike:

"I always told ye Donegal was far ahead of Kerry. When ye went to war over yer snake-killin' saint and drove me out, I traveled far an' yon, and at the end of the summer I found Donegal Crick. Me lad, there's gold on Donegal, by the pound, where on Kerry it's by the ounce. Ye're a good pardner if ye are a stubborn galoot, and if ye'll folly the map, we'll go pardners agin. I'm leaving directions that ye're to run by compass course, without correction, as though the needle pointed north, which it don't. I take it ye've gone out fer grub. When ye come back, come on over to Donegal. There'll be plenty of gold for a regiment—an' plenty of slapjacks fer both." And the signature "Mog O'Donovan, of Donegal Crick," was signed with a flourish.

Connie spread another sheet of paper out on the table and the three bent over it.

"As ye'd go from Cork to Limerick, 10 miles to the split rock. From there 20 miles, as ye'd go from Galway to Dublin, to a hill like a camel's hump. From the hill, 10 miles as ye'd go from Ballymena to Belfast, to a red rock cliff. From there 40 miles, as ye'd go from Trales to Dublin, to the fork of a river. From the fork folly up-

stream, as ye'd go from Roscommon to Kilkenny, about 25 miles to me stakes at the mouth of Donegal Crick."

"What does it all mean?" puzzled Sell.

"They get that way sometimes, livin' all alone," answered Waseche. "Cracked like."

Connie laughed. "I'll bet that's a perfectly good set of directions."

"Oh, sho' they be," grinned Waseche Bill. "S'pose you jest skip right out an' follow 'em. Me an' Sell, we'll wait till you come back."

"I can't even make a start," said the boy. "But if we had a map of Ireland, we could follow them."

"Sho' is right careless of us," said Waseche solemnly, "not fetchin' a map of Ireland to find our way around Alaska with."

"No, really, Waseche—these are Irish towns—I've heard of some of them. But that doesn't help us any because we don't know whether Cork is north or south or east or west of Limerick, and the same with all the rest of 'em. You see, Costello would know. Call O'Donovan crazy if you want to—I think he's dog-done smart! Nobody but Costello could follow these directions without a map of Ireland."

"What are we going to do?" asked Sell.

"Well," drawled Waseche Bill, "first off, we'll

eat suppah, an' then we'll kind of figgah things out." And he started heaping the plates with stew.

Supper over, Connie chopped ice, and filled the kettles. As he was returning from the creek his glance happened to fall on the drooping flag. "Funny, it's so limp," he muttered. "In this wind it ought to be blowing straight out." The kettles and the axe were forgotten, and a few minutes later, when he entered the damp little cabin, his eyes were shining.

"The's two or three things we can do," declared Waseche Bill, when the three had settled themselves. "We can stay heah an' prospect this crick where Costello found gold. Or we can hit out blind an' prospect every crick we come to. Or we can try to locate O'Donovan. What do yo' say, son?"

"I say we hunt for O'Donovan," answered the boy. "In the first place, we promised Costello we would. And in the second place, we want to be in close to the discovery on Donegal Creek, wherever that is. I've got a hunch that we're on the trail of a strike that's got Ten Bow beat a mile!"

Waseche regarded the boy quizzically. "What makes yo' so sho' this crazy O'Donovan's found somethin' rich?" he asked.

"I've seen his gold," replied Connie. Reaching

into his pocket, he drew out a square of green cloth and spread it out on the table. For a moment, the other two stared speechless at the little green flag, in the center of which was a yellow disk some four inches in diameter. The disk was gold—coarse gold—nuggets placed side by side and sewed to the cloth with sinew.

“What—where did yo’ get it?” gasped Waseche.

“I noticed that the flag didn’t float out on the wind,” said the boy, “and I climbed the pole to find out why. That’s the reason—it was too heavy.

“You remember Costello said that O’Donovan had drawn an orange on his green flag. It was what started the fight that drove O’Donovan off this creek. Well, you can’t make a very good-looking orange with a piece of charcoal on a green cloth—but with those nuggets—when you hold that thing off a bit, it looks like a real orange, sure enough. Talk about gold! O’Donovan’s made a find.”

Waseche suddenly brought his fist down upon the table top. “We’ve got to locate that crick!” he exclaimed. “If O’Donovan shows that coarse gold in any camp, he’s goin’ to staht a stampede!”

“I wish Costello were here,” said Sell.

"I'd rather have a map of Ireland," interrupted Connie. "Costello might be hazy in his memory of how those towns lie. But we haven't a map, and it's going to be a long job hunting for those landmarks."

"Yes, an' meantime, O'Donovan goes somewheres fo' supplies, an' flashes his gold, an' half Alaska'll come pourin' in on his back trail, an' beat us to it," foreboded Waseche Bill.

"What else can we do?" asked the boy.

"Get a map!" retorted Waseche. "Yo' an' Sell stay heah an' project around fo' this crick, an' I'll hit the back trail to Wiseman."

"But you won't find a map of Ireland in Wiseman!" objected Connie.

"I might. Someone might have an old atlas. But if they ain't, I'll drop on down the rivah to Allakaket Mission. The' got a school theah, an' it stands to reason they'll have a geography book with maps in it."

"It'll take a month!" cried Connie.

Waseche nodded. "Well, s'pose it does? It'd prob'ly take all summah to work out them landmarks."

"I guess you're right," admitted the boy. "But it's going to be a tough trip. You stay here with Sell, and let me make it."

"No, son. I can make almost as good time on

the trail as yo' can, an' yo' a heap bettah than me when it comes to projectin' around new country. Jest use this cabin fo' a base and I'll come back to it. Now I'll jest copy off them directions an' we'll get to bed. I want an early staht."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Donegal Stampede

WASECHE BILL found no atlas at Wiseman, and he pulled out for Allakaket Mission just two days before a big skin-clad figure, driving six trail-weary dogs, pulled in.

Mog O'Donovan had found himself up against a shortage of grub. In his hovel on Donegal Creek, he had taken an inventory of his shelves that was most discouraging. His eyes burned with a strange glow, however, as they rested upon the caribou-hide bags that showed at the edge of the pile of robes that served as a bunk. They were smallish bags, but fat and heavy, and there were many of them.

"Gold," he muttered. "O'im rich—richer, mebbe, than th' Duke av Gromaugh, wid all his land an' his castle an' his harses an' his dogs. Oi'll go back, whin Oi've gold enough to fill a box car, an' Oi'll show 'em how to live an' spend money!" His day-dreaming ceased. He counted his cartridges and found only eleven. His meat

supply was scanty, and his flour almost gone.

"Oi'll hit out f'r Wiseman," he said. "Oi'll swing 'round by Moike's an' borry back the grub Oi left um. 'Tis a fool he is entoirely to stay on his Kerry Crick whin Oi've got um a claim staked here! But Oi'll make um come to me yet! Two claims, side by side—the ORANGE & SLAPJACK Oi've named um. 'Twill be a proud day fer me whin Moike Costello comes to Donegal!"

Swiftly, the man cached his gold under the snow, threw together his trail pack, and harnessed his dogs. Four days later he crept among the rim rocks and looked down upon the little cabin on Kerry Creek. Smoke rose from the cabin, and O'Donovan was about to descend happily when the door opened and a man stepped out to chop firewood. Another followed, and proceeded to break out the water hole. O'Donovan stared; then he stiffened. Neither of these men was Costello, and O'Donovan's eyes narrowed with rage.

"The dirty dog!" he muttered. "He's got um some new pardners! Mog O'Donovan ain't good enough f'r um no more! He's took down the flag wid me orange on ut! An' he's thryin' to boom Kerry above Donegal! But Oi'll show um! Oi'll open me poke in Wiseman, an' Oi'll

start a stampede f'r Donegal—an' they won't a man av um stop to spit on Kerry!

The man turned, and his eyes fell upon his slenderly loaded sled. But only for a moment he hesitated; then he shook a mittened fist. "Oi'll go as Oi am! Oi'll not ask the dirty thraitor fer a mouthful av grub! He can keep what Oi left in the cabin. 'Tis on account av the orange he done ut—the stubborn ass! But Oi'll show um! I'll file his claim along av me own—an' whin the stampede passes Kerry by, he'll come to Donegal—an' he'll dig his gold under the sign av the ORANGE & SLAPJACK!"

O'Donovan spoke to his dogs, and turning his back on the little valley, headed for a high divide. For a week he forced the trail on short rations; then he killed two sheep, and with the last of their meat in his belly and in the bellies of his dogs, he reached Wiseman and went directly to the office of the recorder.

When he came out, he put up his dogs and with a caribou-skin sack in his hand, he entered the door of the roadhouse, where a dozen men were grouped about the stove.

"Good avenin', gents," he greeted them. "Ye look comfortable—warrum an' comfortable. Take yer comfort while ye can—f'r to-morry ye won't be here."

The men grinned good-naturedly. "Be you a prophet?" asked one.

"Aye, Oi am that. By this time to-morry there'll not be a man av ye here—an' th' best amongst ye'll be farthest."

"An' where might it be we're a-goin'?" inquired another.

"To Donegal! Aye, to Donegal Crick, where the gold lays thick f'r the pannin'."

"An' where's Donegal?"

"'Tis nartheast beyant the mountains, an' beyant the timber—a good three hundred miles, as ye go. 'Tis a bleak land altogether—but, man, 'tis a land av gold!"

"Did you fetch any of this here gold out with you?"

For answer, O'Donovan extended the hand that held the caribou-skin sack, then suddenly let the sack fall to the floor, where it struck with a thud that brought every man in the room to his feet, his eyes on that little sack. There were no smiles on the faces now, as men crowded close—it was a convincing sound, that dull thud.

"Wait!" The command was a hoarse whisper and the keeper of the roadhouse stepped behind his desk and returned with a piece of heavy paper, which he spread flat upon the floor.

Then he reached for the sack and untied the thong and let its contents pour on to the paper—a little pyramid of gleaming grains.

For a full minute there was silence as a dozen men bent close about the golden pile. Then O'Donovan laughed. "Aye, look well, me hearties! Look at ut, an' feel ut, an' taste ut, an' smell ut! 'Tis good gold, altogether—an' Oi've a half a ton more laid by!"

Pandemonium broke loose in the room. Men laughed, and sobbed, and cheered, and thumped each other on the back. Then words became distinguishable—hoarse-bellowed words hurled at O'Donovan, who was swept against the wall, fighting to keep the breath from being squeezed from his body.

"Where is Donegal?"

"Lead us to it!"

"Give us the trail!"

"Coarse gold——!"

"How deep are you down?"

Men, big men, shouldered their way to O'Donovan's side and shoved the crowd back. Brock Mantell bellowed for silence. "Stand back, you fools! Can't you see this man's weak from a short grub trail! Here you, Sid!" he called to the roadhouse keeper, "rustle some grub. An' you birds quiet down till he's et." He stepped

to the paper. "Here, Sam, hold this poke an' we'll sack up his dust. Gosh, it looks to me like the biggest strike since the beach line strike at Nome!"

As he returned the sack to its owner, the door opened and a man slipped unnoticed from the room. It was Blackie Stone. "It'll be half an hour 'fore he gits that grub into him," he muttered. "I got to work fast."

Excitement spreads like wildfire in a gold camp. When Blackie Stone had completed his casual purchase of trail supplies in the store across the street, given the final tug to his sled lashing, and returned to the roadhouse, it was to find the hostelry crowded to capacity with a milling mass of humanity.

O'Donovan was just finishing his meal, and as he shoved the platter away a sudden hush fell upon the room.

Then: "Where's yer crick?" piped a little man squeezed against a side wall. "Gosh, sakes! Tell us er we'll bust!"

Nervous, high-pitched laughter followed the request—but, for the most part, men were silent, their eyes on the gold-bringing stranger.

At last the stranger spoke. "O'Donovan's me name," he announced, "an' Oi've staked two claims on discovery—but th' whole crick's fair

lousy wid gold. 'Tis Donegal Crick ye want. Hit narth till ye cross th' mountains be way av a high divide."

And on and on he went, giving astonishingly clear directions for finding Donegal Creek, railing now and then at Costello, "the thraitor wid his new pardners on Kerry Crick."

"Oi left a map in th' cabin f'r Costello that only him cud read," he wound up, "but he'd have none av it—an' now Oi'm lettin' ye all in. There'll be a big camp on Donegal when Kerry's long forgot. Go to ut, now, ye tarriers! The Donegal stampede's on!"

"But!" yelled a man, "ain't you goin' along?"

"Me dogs is wore out, an' so'm Oi—Oi'll rest up a few days, an' slip back to Donegal by a short cut Oi know——"

"Where's the short cut?" cried a dozen voices.

But O'Donovan shook his head. "Oi'll not be tellin' ye that," he said. "Oi cudn't av Oi wud. There's too many cricks an' crossin's, an' Oi kep' no count av th' trail."

The door flew open and men spewed out onto the street.

Blackie Stone was among the first. Swiftly he harnessed his four dogs and headed north into the darkness. Three miles out of camp he halted.

“They’s a short cut,” he said, “an’ the way he blocked it out, his course lays north an’ east till it hits a cabin—I’ve got it copied down from there. I’ve got a short start, but I’ve only got four dogs—an’ some of ’em’s got eight or ten. The short cut must lay northeast. They’ll overtake me sure on the long trail. It’s me for the short cut! If I can stake in next to discovery—I’ll show ’em!”

Abruptly he started his dogs, and at the first creek that led to eastward he turned from the broader river.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Blackie Steals an Outfit

DAY after day Connie Morgan and Sell had searched for O'Donovan's landmarks. At the beginning of the third week of Waseche Bill's absence, the two were exploring among the foothills to the eastward. The weather had come off warm, and in the more exposed places the snow was softening at midday. Through the glasses Connie studied a high hill to the northward.

"That may be his camel's hump hill," he said. "I want to have a look at it, but there's no use working the dogs any harder than necessary. You take the dogs and pull east till you come to a good camping place. I'll slip over to that hill, and then pick up your trail later."

The inspection of the hill took longer than the boy had expected, and it was well toward evening before he headed for the mountains, picking up the trail of the dog sled before he had gone far.

As he topped a low divide, a rumbling sound

brought him to an abrupt halt. The sound increased to a mighty roar and then, scarcely a mile in front of him, a whole section of mountain seemed to give way and come crashing down onto the plain. When the high-flung columns of snow-dust had cleared away, the boy could see a broad gap in a mighty snow cornice that, under the softening wind, had let go a mass of its snow—a mass that, hurtling downward, had carried trees and rocks before it in a mighty avalanche of destruction.

“Glad I wasn’t under it,” he grinned, as he went on. Suddenly he halted. What about Sell! As far ahead as he could see, the trail of the dog sled led straight toward the foot of the great new-made scar. “No one would camp under a cornice, especially in soft weather,” he assured himself, as he redoubled his pace, “but—maybe a chechahco wouldn’t know about cornices.”

Another low ridge was crossed, and another, and the trail was blocked by a mountainous mass of snow from which protruded twisted branches and trunks of scrub timber. Black shapes appeared running toward him across the snow. The dogs! Running loose!

With his heart sinking, the boy skirted the mass toward the twenty-foot perpendicular ledge

that terminated the sloping hillside. Here he encountered the sled upended against the rock wall, and beyond the sled a dark object motionless in the snow. Connie reached the spot at a bound, and dropped to his knees beside Sell, who lay face downward, unconscious, his legs buried to the knees beneath a mass of snow and scrub timber. No trace of the tent could be seen. "He heard it coming, and started to run, but he didn't quite make it," murmured the boy, as he examined the still form. "He's alive!" he cried aloud, and with his light belt axe he fell to work upon the mass that pinned the man's legs.

For an hour he worked unceasingly. Once Sell partially came to, muttered unintelligible words, moaned, and relapsed into unconsciousness. At length the job was done, the last twisted branch was pried away, and Connie dragged the man free, and proceeded to examine his injuries. Both feet were swollen and discolored, as was the calf of one leg. From the shin of the other leg protruded the jagged end of a bone. "No wonder he fainted," the dismayed boy muttered. "Compound fracture—almost sure to get infected—and all our iodine in the first-aid kit under that pile. And I can't even set his leg till I get to the cabin!"

Jerking off his parka, the boy wrapped up the injured legs and then bound them snugly together with a strip torn from his shirt. Harnessing the dogs, he succeeded in getting the man on the sled, where he lashed him fast with the remainder of his shirt. Then he hit the back trail.

All night the boy burned the trail, easing the sled over rough places, and at noon the next day they reached the cabin. The setting of the bone proved no easy task. Sell, who had regained consciousness, lay on the floor with his wrists lashed to a bunk stanchion and his ankle lashed to an ingeniously rigged lever made from a spruce pole and a piece of babiche line, upon which the boy could apply pressure with his feet while he worked the bone into place with his hands. And through it all, Sell uttered never a sound. "You're a sourdough, all right," approved Connie, when the splints were finally in place.

Despite his pain, Sell grinned. "Not much of one, I'm afraid. A real sourdough would never have camped where a mountain could roll over on him."

"You won't again," laughed the boy. "A man learns by experience."

"It's a high price to pay, sometimes," replied

Sell, through teeth clenched against the pain. "But—it's worth it."

"Sure, it's worth it," agreed Connie. "And it's the man who takes things as they come without losing his nerve or his temper who wins out. And we're up against a trip that's going to take all we've got—but we'll win out, you bet!"

"What's that?" asked the injured man.

"We're going to Wiseman."

"Wiseman!"

"Yes. You see, our medicine kit is in the outfit out under that snowslide. You have got a compound fracture of the leg, and a compound fracture is almost sure to get infected if you have no carbolic or iodine to use on it. I boiled the water I washed it in, and I boiled the bandages. That's the best I could do—but it probably isn't enough. Besides, both bones of the leg are broken, and it's so swollen I can't be sure I've done a decent job of setting. It's a job for a doctor. And the doctor's in Wiseman."

"But," objected Sell, "it will be a hard trip for you—with all the trail work to do, and me to look after besides. Why not wait here till Waseche comes? It won't be long, now, and he's got the other first-aid outfit."

Connie shook his head. "No. We can't afford to take a chance. Waseche might be delayed,

or blood poison might set in in spite of us."

The man groaned. "I've spoiled the whole trip. Oh, I was a fool to camp where I did!"

"Hold on, now," admonished the boy. "It isn't fair to call a man a fool just because he makes a mistake—wait till he makes the same mistake twice. Come on, now, and eat some of this stew. I want to get to bed so we can get an early start. It's getting colder, and we'll have a good, hard trail."

Blackie Stone paused on the summit of a high divide. "I've found his pass," he muttered. "An' somewhere out yonder is gold!——"

He paused abruptly and sniffed the air. "Smoke," he said aloud. "Comin' right up the gulch. This must be the head of Kerry Crick, an' the cabin can't be far off." Urging his dogs on, he worked his way down into the gulch that is the head of Kerry Creek.

Connie Morgan awoke with a start. Outside the hut someone was yelling at dogs. Half dazed he reached for his trousers and drawing on his mukluks, opened the door and stepped out. Twenty yards away a man stood between his own harnessed team and the vicious onslaught of Connie's free dogs. Shouting commands, the boy rushed to the man's assistance, and in a

few moments the uproar subsided and Connie's dogs returned to their beds in the shelter of the scrub spruce.

For a single instant the two stood eyeing each other there in the moonlight. And in that instant Connie Morgan's mind worked with the rapidity of lightning. What was Blackie Stone doing on Kerry Creek? Where was Waseche Bill? Why hadn't Blackie stayed in Wiseman? Had he again outlawed himself among the men who were prepared to be his friends?

Blackie felt the suspicion. "Hello," he said awkwardly. "You here?"

"Yes," answered Connie. "Come in."

The man unharnessed and fed his dogs.

"You sure yourn won't eat 'em up?" he asked. "Mine's too tired to fight."

"No, I don't think they'll bother 'em now. We can hear 'em if they start anything," answered the boy, and leading the way through the doorway, lighted a candle.

"What are you doing here?" Connie asked after kindling the fire and setting the stew pot on the stove.

"It's a stampede," answered Blackie. "They're headin' fer Donegal Crick, an' I took the short cut."

"A stampede! Donegal Creek!" Instantly the

boy remembered that Waseche had carried a copy of O'Donovan's trail directions. But how had Blackie Stone got hold of them? "What do you know about Donegal Creek? And who started the stampede?"

"I know as much as any of 'em does," answered the man. "Big Irishman name of O'Donovan come trailin' into camp an' slams down a poke of coarse gold. Seems like for some reason he'd got mad at his pardner, which he said he was livin' in this cabin. An' he gives out the trail directions an' tells us to hit out fer Donegal. I got a start, an' took the short cut that he come in on—but the hull camp'll be along in a day er so."

"Why didn't the others take the short cut?"

"Too chancy fer 'em, I guess. He wouldn't tell 'em the short cut—said they would git lost. His trail was blowed over but I made it."

"Did you see Waseche Bill, my partner?" Connie asked abruptly.

"Yes. He was in Wiseman. But he pulled out down river two days 'fore O'Donovan pulled in. Went down to the Mission after a map, er somethin'."

As Connie dished out the stew, he reflected. The man's story didn't ring true. Why should O'Donovan start a stampede for Donegal?

How was it that Blackie with only four dogs was heading that stampede? The boy's eyes hardened. If anything had happened to Waseche——

The man finished his meal, and spoke again. "Yer mistrustin' me fer some reason, kid," he began, "but I ain't holdin' it agin you. I ain't fergot what you told 'em down there to Wiseman. An' I aim to show you I ain't forget. You an' yer pardners git in on the head of this stampede, same as I do. But we got to move lively. Them others'll be along pronto. Jump yer dogs into the harness an' come on. We got around a hundred miles to go yet."

"Are you sure you can dope out the trail?" asked the boy.

"Sure—here she is, jest as he told it. I copied it down." The man fumbled in his pocket and, producing a scrap of paper, tossed it on the table. Connie studied it. It was the same route that O'Donovan had left for Costello, except that compass directions took the place of the names of Irish towns. Had Waseche Bill worked it out from a map he had got in Wiseman—and had Blackie somehow managed to copy the directions? If so, where was Waseche Bill?

"Come on, let's go!" urged the man impatiently. "The gold's there—I seen it. What you hangin' back fer?"

"I can't go," answered Connie. "I've got to stay with him." He jerked his thumb toward Sell, who lay listening. "His leg's busted, and I've got to get him to the doctor. We start in the morning for Wiseman."

Blackie interrupted a protest from Sell. "They won't be no doctor in Wiseman," he said. "Doc Pearson's on the trail right now. He'll be along here by to-morrow or next day—they'll all be along here. They've got to find this cabin fer a startin' point. Doc'll look after him when he comes along. Come on! We'll leave word here that we'll stake fer Doc."

"No," Connie answered, "I'll stay here. Maybe you're all right, Stone. I hope you are. But—just suppose you're not. Suppose there isn't any stampede—what would happen to Sell, alone here? No, I stay—and to-morrow we'll start for Wiseman. By the short-cut trail!" As the boy added that last, he eyed Blackie sharply. If harm had befallen Waseche on that trail, the man would know that discovery would be swift.

The effect of his words strengthened his suspicion. Blackie Stone was angry. "You young fool!" he blazed. "Hain't I jest told you, they hain't no doctor in Wiseman, an' that he'll be along on the other trail any time. If you don't

believe me, jest delay about startin' fer a day er so, an——"

"—and maybe it'll snow and cover your back trail, eh?"

"—an' the doc'll be right here at yer door—that's what!" The man picked up the scrap of paper and returned it to his pocket, and pulled on his cap. "Well, if you hain't goin' along—so long. I hain't got no time to set around an' auger."

"So long," answered the boy, "and remember—I'll see you again."

"Pretty near sure to," answered the man as he slammed the door behind him.

Connie listened as Blackie harnessed his dogs and headed northward down the creek. Then he went back to bed.

A mile down the creek, Blackie Stone halted. For some moments he stood as though undecided; then, toggling his tired leader, he stole cautiously back up the creek. He had always been a good hand with dogs—even his enemies admitted that—and back under cover of the scrub spruce he had no difficulty in gaining the confidence of Connie's five big Malemutes. Then, very stealthily, he took the harness from the pole cache and eased the sled away from the cabin. Swiftly he harnessed the dogs, and started

off down the creek. Reaching his own outfit, he turned his dogs loose, transferred his pack to Connie's sled, and with his own sled trailing, started on. At the split rock he cached his empty sled, and with a grin urged the fresh dogs eastward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

On to Donegal!

LONG before daylight, next morning, Connie Morgan kindled his fire and went out to feed his dogs. In vain he called to them. With sudden foreboding, he rushed into the scrub and stared down at the empty beds of spruce boughs. Mechanically he examined the cache, and the spot where he had upended the sled. Dogs, sled, harness—all gone! And Sell helpless! No chance now of getting him to Wiseman!

Red-hot anger surged into the boy's heart. Waseche Bill probably done for on the trail—that was why Blackie had stolen the dogs—so he couldn't hit the trail and uncover evidence of his crime! Sell left here to die of blood poisoning. And he himself unable now even to follow the man who had wrought this harm! But he would follow him sometime! Follow him to the end of the earth, if need be! And when he found him!——

Wild ideas went racing through the boy's

brain. With an effort, he controlled himself and, stepping into the cabin, proceeded in silence to cook breakfast.

"How soon do we start?" Sell asked after the meal.

"You know," Connie answered calmly, "I've been thinking about what Blackie Stone said about that stampede coming from Wiseman. He seemed dead sure the doctor would be along, and I've decided to wait a couple of days. You'll be a lot more comfortable in the bunk than on a sled, bumping over the trail. Of course," he added, "if they don't show up soon, we'll tackle it."

Sell readily agreed, and after washing the dishes and attending to the injured man, Connie went outside, felled a tree, and began the construction of a sled. "It will take two days to make it," he muttered as he worked, "and I'll have to pull it myself. But—we'll get there! We've got to!"

During the day, two of Blackie's tired dogs showed up at the cabin, and toward evening, a third. To these Connie gave warm welcome and a big feed of cooked meat.

Night found the sled more than half completed. In the morning, before starting to work, the boy walked down the creek. A mile below

the cabin he came upon Blackie's discarded harness, but he found no evidence of the passing of any stampeders—and it was here they must pass, where a tributary flowing in from the westward formed a natural trail. Carrying the harness, the boy returned with a lighter heart—three dogs with two full days' rest and liberal feeding were a thousand times better than no dogs at all!

He fell to work on the sled with renewed energy, and it was nearly noon when a loud shout brought him to his feet to see Brock Mantell facing him upon the snow-covered ice of the creek. The man waved a greeting: "Throw your stuff on your sled and come on!" he cried. "There's a stampede on—an' a real one!"

"Are you on the head of it?"

"Yes. Blackie Stone started ahead, but I haven't run onto his trail. He must have got lost somewhere."

"He didn't get lost," answered the boy gravely, "and you'll be following his trail from now on. He stopped here night before last and stole my whole outfit—dogs and harness and sled!"

"Stole 'em!"

"Yes—stole 'em. And not only that, he left me with a crippled partner on my hands, knowing

I was depending on those dogs to take him to the doctor."

Mantell's face darkened with anger. "Wait till we get down there! We'll fix him! It'll take more than Burr MacShane to save him this time! But you ain't so bad off, at that. Doc Pearson's right behind. There he comes, now!" The man pointed down the creek, where a dog outfit was rapidly approaching. Mantell swung his dogs toward the approaching team. "I'll send him to look at your partner!" he called. "I'll stake for him, right next to me!"

The man was gone, and staring after him, pointing toward the cabin, and then Mantell went flying off to the northward, while the other team came on.

"That's a darned ingenious arrangement," approved the doctor, an hour later, when, after the expert had finished with Sell, Connie explained how he had set the bones. "But you ought to be in on this stampede. I'll stay here with the patient, and you go ahead. Mantell says your team's been stolen. You take mine. Brock is going to stake for me; so I'm all right. I bet your other partner is sorry he isn't in on it. He pulled out for Allakaket just two days too soon."

Connie, who was sitting on a bunk, suddenly

leaped to his feet. What was this man saying—that Waseche Bill had actually gone on down the river? That's what Blackie Stone had said! And Blackie had told him of the stampede—had told him that the doctor would be right here at his door—and the doctor was here! Was it possible that Blackie Stone had been telling the truth? "Who started this stampede?" Connie cried.

"An Irishman named O'Donovan. He filed two claims, and flashed a sack of coarse gold, and blurted out the directions how to get to Donegal Creek. It was a crazy thing to do—but he did it. I was right there and heard him—and that's why I'm here now."

"But why did he steal my dogs?" cried the boy.

"Steal your dogs! Who?"

Without answer, Connie dashed through the door. "I'm taking your outfit!" he called back. "Thanks! I've got to get at the bottom of this before anything more happens." And with that explanation, which was no explanation at all to the bewildered doctor or Sell, he was off—to save Blackie Stone from Brock Mantell's threatened vengeance, or to see him brought to justice.

Once strung out on the creek bed, the dogs followed the plainly marked trail, and throwing himself upon the sled, Connie urged them into a run. A dog team appeared on the ice before him—two of them—three of them. They stopped and Connie could see men pointing toward the cabin and toward his own fast flying dogs. Then they turned northward ahead of him and, following the trail of Blackie Stone and Brock Mantell, urged their dogs to the limit. And as he passed the mouth of the tributary from which these men had emerged, he glanced to the westward—and saw a long line of approaching black dots that were the men of Wiseman burning the snow on the Donegal stampede.

Weary from the long trail, the doctor's dogs lagged, and try as he would Connie could not gain on the outfits ahead of him. But he noted with satisfaction that he was holding his own against the outfits behind.

It was nearly noon on the third day out from the cabin that Connie Morgan guided his dogs in among what looked to him like a forest of claim stakes. Without even loosening the axe from his sled he hurried toward a small group of men, which broke up as one of them stepped toward him, smiling.

The man was Blackie Stone. "I told you we were pretty sure to meet again," he said. "Look—we're goin' to be neighbors!"

Connie's glance followed the man's pointing finger, and his eyes read the names on the claim stakes: CONNIE MORGAN—WASECHE BILL—T. SELL—BLACKIE STONE—and the adjoining ones—BROCK MANTELL—DOC PEARSON. His eyes sought the smiling face of Blackie Stone.

The man was speaking again. "I told you I hadn't fergot what you done fer me—back there in Wiseman," he said. "It was a hard job, an' a clean one—to plant them stakes here next to discovery. But I done it! About the last good, clean thing I done was goin' on twenty-six years ago—so long that I'd almost forgot it—till Burr MacShane called it to mind, that night in the roadhouse. Durin' them twenty-six years, the name of Blackie Stone hain't been one to be proud of. But I'm still goin' to pack it. I'd ort to be able to stand it if you fellers kin. There's clean gold in this here gravel—an' I'm a-goin' to dig it out, an' start in on twenty-six years of slate-wipin'."

Connie's hand shot out, and the man grasped it. "But," cried the boy, "why did you steal my dogs?"

"Why, pshaw, son—I jest naturally had to!

I seen you suspicioned me—figgered I'd murdered yer pardner an' stoled them trail directions, er somethin'. I know'd Doc 'ud be along an' I know'd that if you didn't have no outfit, you couldn't go kihootin' off on that short-cut trail an' miss him."

"I was a fool!" exclaimed the boy.

"N-o-o-o," answered Blackie Stone. "Judgin' from what you'd saw of me, I'd say you figgered about right—but I couldn't let you go ahead with it, could I?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"Slapjack & Flapjack"

THE men of Wiseman poured in on Donegal, and during the next few days the creek was staked for miles above and below discovery. Waseche Bill came, and later O'Donovan himself.

Connie sought him out and told him the story of Costello. "And he swears you're the best partner a man ever had," concluded the boy, "but that you're so stubborn you insist a flapjack is a slapjack."

The big Irishman listened intently, and the boy noted a twinkle in his eye.

"Oi'll have Costello fetched up here," O'Donovan said. "Oi'll fetch in lumber an' build um a board house that'll be good f'r his rheumatiz. An' while Oi'm at ut, Oi'll just change the name av them discovery claims."

He stepped into his tent and, returning with brush and paint pot, walked to the new board he had erected on the claims. A few swift strokes

obliterated the words ORANGE & SLAPJACK and on the reverse side he printed the legend:

SLAPJACK & FLAPJACK
O'Donovan & Costello, props.

THE END

